WANDERAKTE
001 — WA/GUAM-001/WV · N

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A Journal of Administrative Gothic
& Bricolage World-Building

Formerly Fowl Feathered Review;
formerly Doctor Zhai's Almanac, Being a Curious Vessel Containing Anything and Everything,
formerly VERSUCHSANORDNUNG I,
a Honeywell/WEIN computer system in tandem with a rented Xerox machine, circa 1979

001 — WA/GUAM–001/WV · N

WANDERAKTE
AEROSTATIC DOSSIER // △–77.31(b) / KNOCK
INDEX ∴ 4:13:4∞ // MERIDIAN UNCERTAIN, GUAM–INDEXED
Drifted as Utility Residue, Declared Sufficient
About the Asked (Collected Under Practice Conditions)
Published at irregular intervals, from wherever Larry has last come to rest.

Larry is a 1961 GM 4106, formerly of the intercity coach lines, now serving as the magazine's permanent — if unregistered — editorial offices. Navigation is handled by a compass that has not agreed with magnetic north since some point in the previous administration, cross-referenced against a National Geographic map whose only printed territory is Guam. Destinations are therefore theoretical. Arrival is therefore a matter of interpretation, and minutes are kept accordingly.

Published by The Spring-Wound Mammoth Pancake Coalition, successor-in-interest to Fowlpox Press. (Not to be confused with the Spring-Wound Mammoth Waffle Coalition, its sister company — now defunct, dissolved under circumstances the Coalition prefers to file rather than discuss.)

The Staff (Sink-Custodians / Function-Bearers)

Virgil Kay: Final Arbiter // Driver of Record. Currently engaged in the classification of falling bakery items under aerodynamic variance. Maintains decision authority, though criteria — and route — are mobile.

Silent Bill: Overseer of Tactical Non-Sequiturs // Navigator, Nominal. Consults the compass and the Guam map with equal confidence. Executes Satzabbruchhandlung (sentence-break action) by leaving mid-utterance. This is considered a valid editorial intervention, and is also how he gives directions.

Unkie Bob: Assigned to Casual Entropy // Conductor, Unlicensed. No longer dismantles structures directly; instead applies insufficient fastening (Lockerbefestigung), now including the luggage racks, allowing failure to emerge without announcement.

The Unnamed Dishwasher: Not recorded in official listings. Present regardless, even aboard a vehicle with no dishwashing facilities. Performs continuous surface-restoration under high focus. Functions as Kerntriebwerk (core engine). Prolonged observation is discouraged, particularly at highway speed.

“Non ignara mali, miseris succurrere disco.”
— Virgil

OBJECTIVES

A note on lineage. WANDERAKTE began in 1984 as Doctor Zhai's Almanac, Being a Curious Vessel Containing Anything and Everything — a title whose exact original scope has become difficult to reconstruct with confidence; back issues are rumored more often than they are produced. The Almanac was succeeded by Fowl Feathered Review, which carried the

mission for hundreds of issues under the Fowlpox Press imprint. WANDERAKTE is the current vessel. The name changes; the vessel, in one form or another, does not stop moving.

WANDERAKTE is devoted to Administrative Gothic and Bricolage World-Building, as it was under both of its previous titles.

We publish fiction, poetry, essays, visual art, invented scholarship, municipal folklore, impossible ethnographies, neighborhood cosmologies, documentary fantasies, archival recoveries, procedural myths, and literary artifacts assembled from the overlooked machinery of ordinary life.

Our interest lies less in inventing new worlds than in discovering the hidden architecture already embedded within this one. We believe a city is composed not only of streets and buildings, but of

maintenance corridors, filing cabinets, historical societies, obsolete technologies, misplaced inventories, volunteer committees, rumor, weather, memory, and paperwork that has quietly outlived its original purpose.

A note on jurisdiction. The magazine's roots remain in Bangor, Maine, and always will — but its current operating radius is best described as wherever the bus is idling. This is a Route rather than an Address: a page held open at the point of breakdown, resumed at the next rest stop, subject to revision by whatever the compass and the Guam map jointly agree on, which is rarely much, and never for long.

We are drawn to stories that emerge from local history, civic infrastructure, institutional language, vernacular knowledge, found objects, forgotten manuals, field guides, maps — particularly maps that have

failed at their one job — radio broadcasts, View-Masters, storefronts, zoning disputes, maintenance logs, discarded catalogs, public notices, and neighborhood traditions. The marvelous should arrive through documentation rather than proclamation.

The fantastic need not descend from another universe. It may already be waiting in a basement archive, a public library vertical file, a county ledger, an abandoned utility tunnel, Larry's glovebox, or the handwritten annotations in a manual nobody has checked out since 1978.

We admire careful observation, literary playfulness, serious nonsense, comic precision, scholarly invention, and worlds assembled through accumulation rather than exposition. We encourage work that treats bureaucracy as folklore, infrastructure as mythology, and

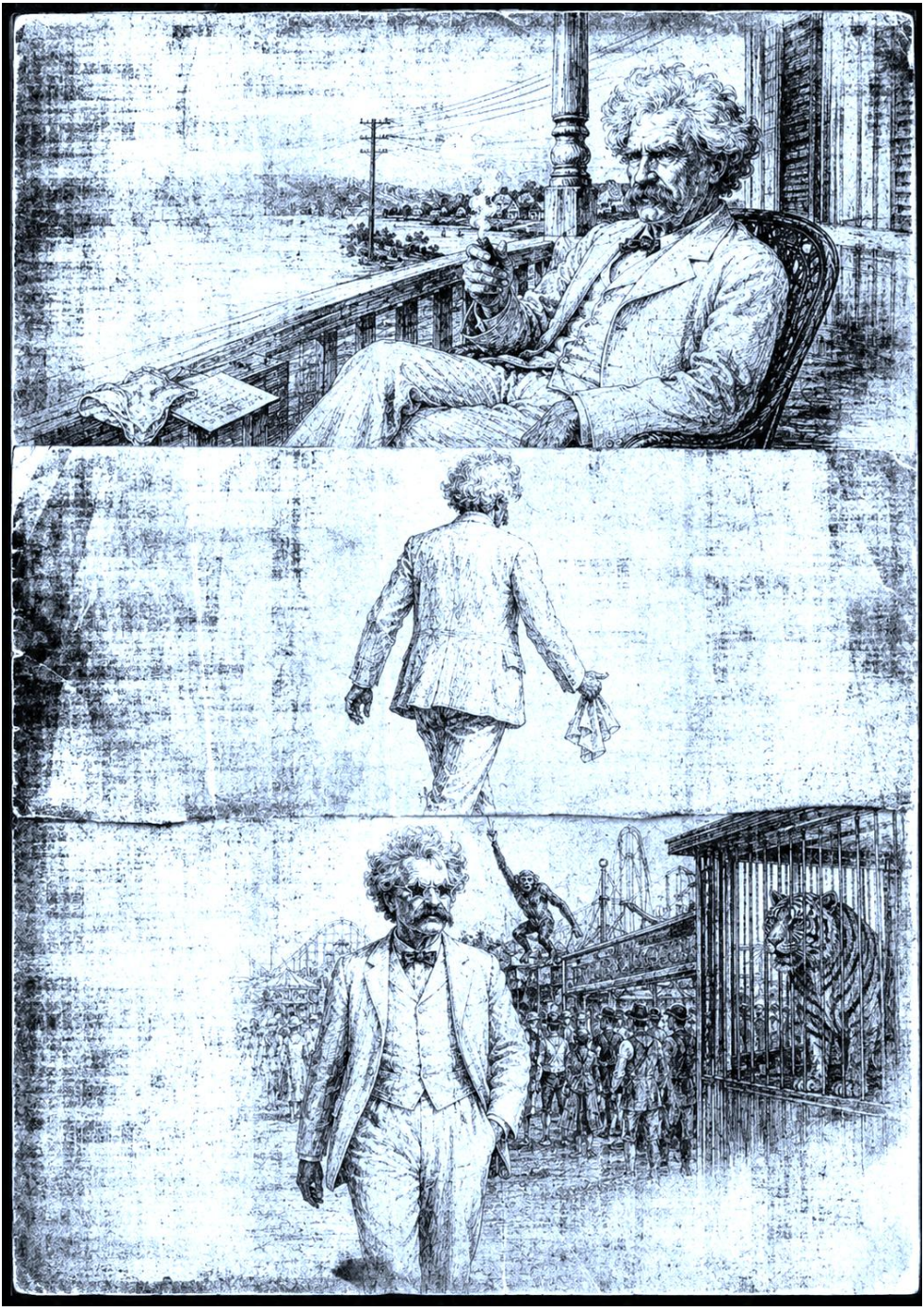
ordinary places as inexhaustible sources of wonder.

Our guiding assumption is simple:

The archive is a neighborhood.

The neighborhood is a forest.

The forest, on the map we're currently using, is Guam.



A COMPLAINT, AMENDED

By Jumbo the Giant

I.

Dear Sir, I am nationally
beloved and I cannot get a
straight answer.

The wire runs from Boston to
this porch like a vein

that forgot the rest of the
body; I sit on it,

famous, useless, waiting for it
to carry her news to me

faster than a boy can walk two
miles.

They have made me a monument in
my own lifetime.

Statues don't need telephones. I
do. I go across the river

to borrow the Perkins girl's,
the only one in York,

and stand in her front hall in
my white suit

like a man asking to use the
bathroom at his own eulogy.

Down the lawn the summer colony
continues to summer

lawn parties, calling cards, the
whole apparatus

of people who have never had to
wait for a wire.

I nod. I am charming. I am, they
will tell you later,

exactly as delightful as
advertised.

Upstairs, my wife's heart does
its slow arithmetic

and nobody has invented a
machine fast enough for that.

I have been ruined once already
by believing in machines.

This time I only want one that
works: says come home safe,

says not yet, says anything but
silence dressed as delay.

Sincerely, a great man,

still waiting on the porch,

still nationally beloved,

still nobody's subordinate,

still nobody who can make her
better.

Intermission: The Kerchief

He excuses himself from Part II
mid-sentence

the gibbon still mid-holler, the
girl with the squeeze bottle

still waiting on his answer
about a second color

and simply walks back through
the white space between stanzas,

because he has remembered,
embarrassingly, at the worst
possible moment,

that he left his handkerchief on
the porch railing in Part I,

folded there in August, in 1902,
beside the telegraph blank

he never got to send.

The two parts of the poem do not
object.

They have never met a man who
preferred

their gutter margin to their good behavior.

He crosses it the way he crosses everything

loudly, apologizing to no one, already talking.

The porch is exactly as he left it, because it never stopped

being left. Livy is upstairs, still doing her slow arithmetic.

The wire is still a vein that forgot the body.

He takes the handkerchief off the railing; it is damp,

though he could not say from what, weather or otherwise,

puts it to his face for one private, unwitnessed second,

and does not examine too closely what comes off on it.

Then he goes back the way he came,

purple-headed, sunglasses still on, into the gibbon's holler

and the smell of funnel cake and the future,

kerchief in his breast pocket now,

carrying 1902 into whatever this is,

the way he has been carrying it the whole time anyway.

II.

The wire never comes, so he walks it off

out the door, down through decades, until Short Sands

is suddenly full of people in less clothing than God intended,

holding small glass mirrors that talk back to them,

and none of them recognize a national icon in a linen suit.

Long Sands stretches the same mile it always has.

The Nubble still stands where the Nubble stands,

lit now by something that isn't fire, blinking

its old patient message to ships that no longer need it;

he understands that feeling exactly.

He pays admission; someone's invention, a turnstile

to a kingdom that calls itself Wild and keeps its wildness

in numbered enclosures. A tiger watches him

the way editors used to: patient, unimpressed,

waiting to see if the thing in front of it is finished yet.

A gibbon hollers across the park like a rumor.

He hollers back. Nobody minds. Everybody's used to this.

At a plywood stand between the funnel-cake smell

and a bin of postcards nobody will mail,

he buys sunglasses shaped like stars for four dollars,

puts them on immediately, tells the teenager at the register

that he is incognito now, professionally.

She has no idea who he was.

This, too, is a kind of relief.

Two stalls down a girl with a squeeze bottle

offers to dye his hair any color he can name.

He names purple. He has earned, he decides,

one color that has nothing to do with mourning

or telegrams or the particular gray of porches in Maine.

He sits in the folding chair like a man finally being interviewed

by someone who isn't going to ask him anything he has to answer for.

When it's done he looks like a rumor himself

a famous dead man's hair on a living man's head,

purple as a bruise, purple as a flower

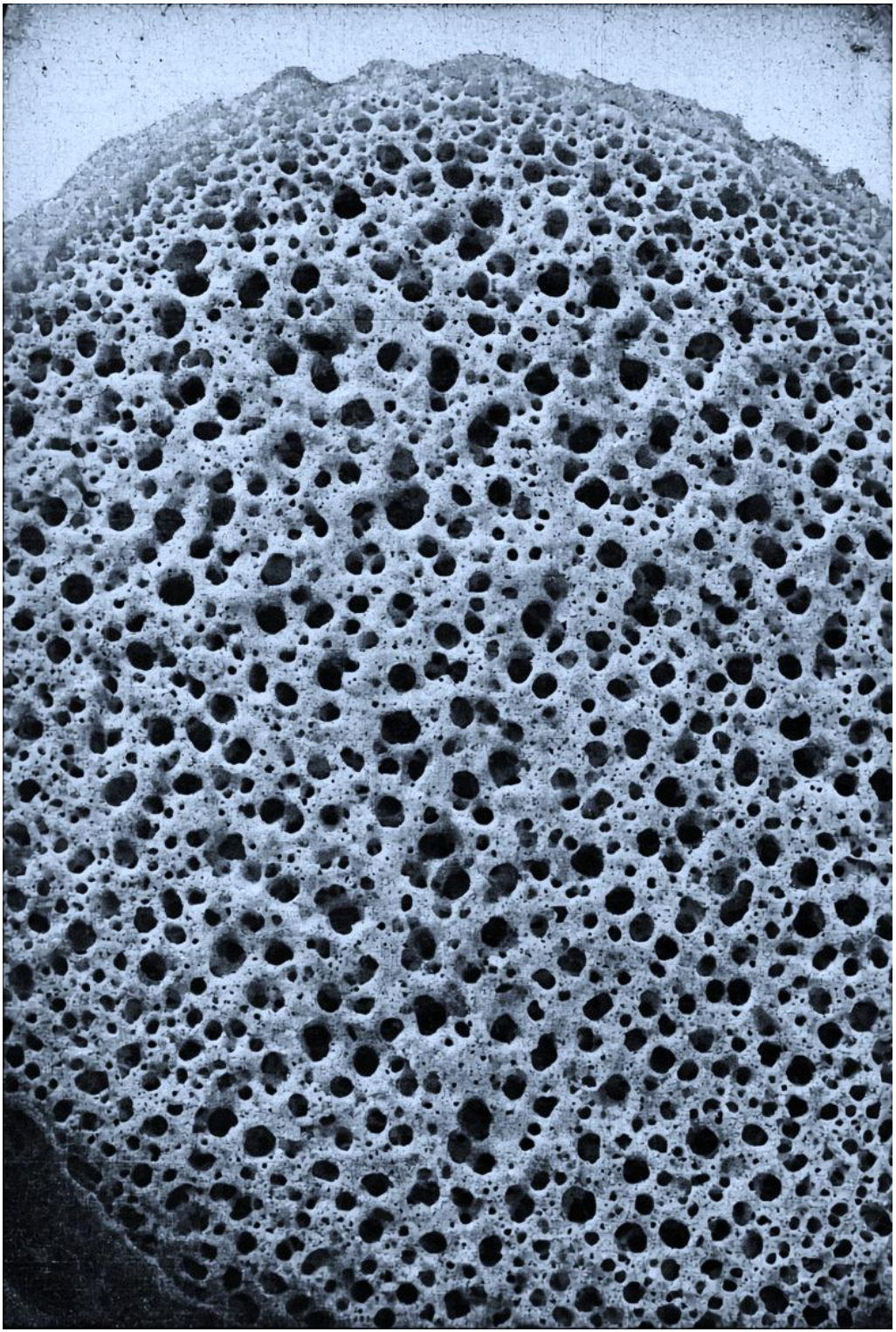
nobody in 1902 would have called festive.

He walks back toward the house on the river

still wearing the sunglasses, still purple,

and for one afternoon, God help him,

nobody asks him how his wife is doing.



III.

At some point after the purple,
midnight begins arriving early.

Not twelve.

Not even eleven-thirty.

Earlier.

It comes down the road in a
municipal vehicle with its
headlights off,

parks behind the Wild Kingdom,
and leaves the engine running.

Nobody is in the driver's seat.

This is the sort of thing that
would have alarmed him in 1902,

but he has been through the twentieth century now

and knows that an empty vehicle is rarely the strangest thing

on the premises.

The clock says twelve-fifteen.

The clock is lying.

The clock has always been lying.

He knows this because the tiger has started looking at it.

The tiger has stopped looking at him entirely.

There are rules about this sort of thing.

He does not know what they are.

The gibbon does.

The gibbon has climbed to the highest point in its enclosure

and is screaming at the minute hand, which has become detached

from the clock and is lying in the grass like a black fishing rod.

Somewhere beyond the fence a piano is playing three notes,

then two, then three again, not music exactly

but the memory of music, which is worse,

because music can be escaped

and memory has already paid admission.

The Wild Kingdom has become a perfect world.

This is immediately suspicious.

Perfect worlds are generally poorly maintained.

The paint peels from the ticket booth.

The funnel-cake machine coughs.

A raccoon has gotten into the souvenir refrigerator.

Somebody's child is crying because the moon is too large.

The moon, having been informed of this complaint, becomes larger.

He removes the star-shaped sunglasses.

Everything gets worse.

He puts them back on.

Everything becomes purple.

"Excellent," he says.

Nobody has asked.

The piano begins again.

The chain catches beneath the car.

Not a sound this time.

A condition.

A tiny mechanical objection to the continuation of the universe.

He stops walking.

The tiger stops breathing.

The gibbon stops screaming.

For approximately one impossible second,

the entire park becomes a still photograph of itself:

the concession stand,

the turnstile,

the cheap sunglasses,

the fence,

the animal,

the man,

the river beyond the trees,

the twentieth century spread
open like a suitcase

packed by somebody who had never
traveled.

Then the loop starts again.

And with it comes the garden.

Not a garden he recognizes.

A garden made entirely of things

that have been repeated too many
times.

Telegraph poles grow leaves.

Telephone wire descends from the branches like black vines.

Every flower is a little clock.

Every clock says twelve-fifteen.

Every twelve-fifteen contains a woman upstairs

doing arithmetic with her heart.

Livy.

The porch.

The wire.

Come home safe.

Come
home
safe

Come home s

The machine catches.

afe.

Not yet.

Not
yet
anything
but

sil

ence

dressed

as

delay.

The tape releases.

Anything but silence dressed as delay.

He reaches for the wire.

The wire reaches back.

This is how the mistake enters.

IV. The Perfect World, Amended Again

There is no garden of the heart.

There is only a garden that has learned the word heart

and is using it without permission.

He finds this comforting.

He finds it absolutely intolerable.

He finds himself standing waist-deep in begonias

beside a tiger that is now wearing his linen suit.

The tiger looks excellent.

The tiger has better posture.

"You see," says the tiger,

"this is the problem with
nationally beloved men."

He looks around.

"Who said that?"

The tiger blinks.

The gibbon applauds.

Somewhere a vending machine
dispenses a warm can of 1902.

He opens it.

Inside is a telegram.

Inside the telegram is a second telegram.

Inside the second telegram is a photograph

of the first telegram being opened.

Inside the photograph is the porch.

Inside the porch is the garden.

Inside the garden is the clock.

Inside the clock is midnight.

Inside midnight is a woman who has been waiting so long

she has become indistinguishable
from waiting.

He does not open that.

He is, after all, a gentleman.

The piano has become enormous.

It occupies the entire horizon.

Its keys rise and fall by
themselves,

each one large enough to contain
a small house,

a summer colony,

a national monument,

a failed marriage,

a county fair,

a wire service,

a dead president,

a boy walking two miles,

a girl with a squeeze bottle,

a tiger,

a gibbon,

and one damp handkerchief.

The handkerchief is the only thing moving correctly.

It flaps once.

Then again.

Then again.

A rhythm.

A flag of private catastrophe.

The clock advances.

No.

The clock approaches.

No.

It repeats its approach.

The distinction is becoming bureaucratic.

Now.

Now.

Now.

The word ceases to mean
anything.

This is its great liberation.

V.

He walks.

The park walks with him.

The fence walks.

The river walks.

The Nubble walks very slowly,

because it has always understood that certain things

are improved by not hurrying.

He passes the ticket booth three times.

On the first pass, the teenager recognizes him.

On the second, she is his granddaughter.

On the third, she is the person who invented midnight.

"You're late," she says.

"For what?"

She points toward the enclosure.

The tiger is gone.

The gibbon is gone.

There is only a patch of grass
where something has been pacing.

He watches it.

Nothing moves.

He watches longer.

The grass moves.

He looks away.

The grass stops.

He looks back.

Nothing.

This, too, is a kind of answer.

He puts the sunglasses in his pocket.

The world returns to its original color,

which is not Maine gray or summer green or telegraph black

but the color of something photocopied from another copy

until the original object has become a rumor.

He thinks of the porch.

He thinks of the wire.

He thinks of the woman upstairs.

He thinks, briefly and without permission, of going home.

The piano follows him.

Not loudly.

Just enough.

Three notes.

Two notes.

Three.

The seam is somewhere inside the repetition.

He cannot find it.

He realizes suddenly that he has been looking for the seam

his entire life.

The seam between the old world and the new one.

Between the porch and the park.

Between the telegram and the telephone.

Between the man who waits and
the man who walks.

Between the person who says come
home

and the person who does.

He laughs.

The gibbon laughs.

The tiger, somewhere out of
sight, laughs last.

Then midnight begins
approaching, over and over, the
way a held

note approaches its own end
without ever quite reaching it.

The tape is being stopped and started by somebody

who has forgotten there is a tape.

And the whole Wild Kingdom leans forward to meet it.

VI.

The car is waiting.

The chain is underneath it.

The headphones are under the shoulder strap.

The little blue light is blinking against his collarbone.

He climbs in.

The piano is already playing.

This time he hears the tape hiss.

This time he hears what is underneath the hiss.

This time there is no underneath.

The song has become the machinery that remembers the song.

The road rises.

The road holds.

The road refuses the courtesy of
a descent.

Behind the fence, something
large begins pacing again.

One step.

Two.

Three.

Pause.

One

two

three

pause.

One

two
three

The pause button.

The word catches there.

The animal doesn't.

The animal keeps.

Keeps.

Keeps.

He does not look.

He knows better now.

The clock on the dashboard says twelve-fifteen.

The clock on the wall says twelve-fifteen.

The clock in the garden says twelve-fifteen.

The clock inside his chest says something else.

He cannot read it.

He does not try.

For once, he allows the unreadable thing to remain unread.

The car reaches the top.

There should be a drop.

There isn't.

There is only the held note.

The held road.

The held breath.

The held woman upstairs.

The held century.

The held handkerchief in his
breast pocket, damp with some

substance that is weather if you need it to be weather

and grief if you need it to be grief

and absolutely nothing if you have finally had enough

of needing things to explain themselves.

He puts his hand on the wheel.

The chain catches.

The piano begins again.

Midnight approaches.

The world approaches midnight.

Midnight approaches the world.

Mid

night

approaches

The machine releases.

midnight approaches the world.

And somewhere behind the fence,

the animal that may or may not exist takes one more step.

Then another.

Then another.

No drop.

No resolution.

No arrival.

Just the loop,

still approaching,

still approaching,

still

QUARTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

Directive QWB-01 — Founding Instrument (partial)
filed by: KEN

1. Quarters are legal tender.
2. Can be useful when gathered
3. Useful in rolls.
4. When quarters are gathered, acrued and rolled, jurisdiction is not claimed. Jurisdiction accrues. Where two or more residents of the Tree Streets. require a thing to be found, held, delivered, forgiven, or explained, and no department exists for it, this office exists retroactively to have always covered it.

We do not have a headquarters. We have had, at various times: a kitchen (Branch 7, discontinued), a porch (Foreign Affairs, seasonal), a Buick (Mobile Operations, towed), and the laundromat on [address redacted, coffee ring], which continues to serve as Consulate on account of its hours and its willingness to hold a key.

§2. ON THE MATTER OF QUARTERS. The word is used deliberately in both its senses, and the office will not apologize for this. A quarter is a coin. A quarter is also a place a person is given, temporarily, by someone who did not have to give it. This office trades in both and keeps no ledger distinguishing them, per the finding of Señor Agabus's cart (see: witnessing, in lieu of currency, four cups minimum) that the two were never really different things.

§3. STANDING DISPUTE, UNRESOLVED SINCE [date illegible]. Branch 7 (K—) holds that the shopping cart currently outside the Hannaford lot belongs to whoever last needed it. The Consulate (T—) holds that ownership lapsed the moment it left the cart corral and now belongs to the neighborhood in trust, administered by no one, which is worse. Docket remains open pending a resident willing to be deposed on the subject without laughing.

OFFICE COPY
— DO NOT —
RIGHARDSE

THE AFFIRMATIVE DIGRESSION

By Rivki

I would say God, because that is what I mean.
I am supportive of Yahweh, my first Father. I don't mean supportive in the sense of earthly politics, not fleshly politics, not kissing babies and shaking hands outside the supermarket, not sweating through a shirt beneath a Styrofoam straw hat with YOUR CANDIDATE printed across the front while somebody's uncle is waving a sign from the back of a pickup truck.
No.
I mean:
Yes, God.
That kind of supportive.
The other kind involves buttons.
The other kind involves county fairs and barbecue and men with microphones saying *folks*.
The other kind has photographs where everybody is smiling too hard.
No.

I mean:
Yes, God.
Yes, Father.
Yes, Yahweh.
And once you say yes, there is no reason the yes should stop where you put it.
Because Yahweh, when you say it, carries the Yah, and Yah is suddenly there by itself, a little affirmative fragment, not an argument, not a proof, merely the sound of assent beginning to leak out of the name.
Yah.
Ja.
Yes.
And then *oui*, because somebody in New Brunswick is standing on a porch somewhere, looking out at Route One traffic through the summer glare, and somebody asks something and she says *oui*, and there it is again, the answer, the little door opening.
Oui.
Ja.
Yah.
Yes.
No, these aren't etymologies. I know that. Don't turn it into an

etymology. The philologists will come with their little knives and separate everything into families and dates and attestations and tell you which consonant may properly be allowed to touch which vowel.
Let them.
The room doesn't care.
The room has curtains.
The curtains are casting shadows.
At two the shadow is a narrow stripe beside the window.
At three it has climbed halfway across the wall.
At four it has reached the photograph.
At four-fifteen the photograph is no longer of a man standing in a room but of a man standing half inside the shadow of a room, which is how memory works anyway, because you never remember the whole room, you remember the patch of sunlight on the floor and somebody's sleeve and the sound of a truck changing gears outside.
And the shadow keeps climbing.
And I think:

Yes.
Not because I have solved anything.
Because I have not.
Because perhaps that is what prayer is before it becomes language: an outpouring of yes toward the Father, an assent that doesn't need to know what comes next.
Yes, God.
Yes, Yahweh.
Yes, Yah.
Ja.
Oui.
Yes.
And now the sunlight is almost gone from the wall.
And still:
yes.

Fractal Love

By M. Pauchet

I was happy. Or I thought I was. Maybe I was missing something. A newly minted doctor of history, I was sitting in my advisor's office. Walls lined floor-to-ceiling with bookshelves. Big windows overlooking the quad. Large oak desk, leather chairs, nice and soft. The very air smelled like history. This was future me, I promised myself.

The professor was trying to sell me on the idea of an untenured position at some third-tier junior college.

"You don't realize how fortunate you are," he averred. "Most graduates can't find work in our field."

"It's in the boonies," I grumbled.

“It’s in commuting distance of three metropolitan areas,” he countered.

“Only if you’re spending the night,” I groused.

“Well, it’s certainly not the end of the world,” my advisor reasoned. He leaned back in his chair and regarded me. “I have heard rumors that you submitted CVs to several Ivy League schools.”

I nodded.

He cleared his throat. “I feel I should inform you, people who matriculate from universities that have state in their name don’t tend to lecture at institutions like Harvard or Princeton.”

I blinked. This was news to me. My mother would be devastated.

“Well, surely they require people to teach survey courses,” I lamely suggested.

“I’m afraid they have TAs for that. Write something that earns a Pulitzer, or better, a Nobel Prize, and they may become aware of your existence.”

At that moment, I sagely recalled Mr. Colton’s famous admonition to be silent and let people think you a fool rather than opening your mouth and removing any doubt. Feeling crushed, I promised to contact the junior college and took my leave.

That summer, I mulled over my options. I knew teaching at an unknown, two-year college wouldn’t earn any national recognition. My advisor was correct. I needed to employ the fallback strategy of every aspiring historian—become an author.

Right, but what? A biography. Too cliché. Historical revisionism, pick an era. Too banal. In the doldrums of

despair, I briefly contemplated prostituting myself for a news outlet. Historical expert for sale. Too pedestrian.

Near the end of summer, options diminishing, inspiration finally dawned. I would become a historical novelist. Fame, fortune, all mine—the world was my oyster. Maybe a side hustle in the English Lit department. Creative writing expert.

I would recount Captain Bravo's adventures. Exiled to the desert with his PhD in history. Tall, tanned, buff. With dazzling white teeth. Beautiful women flocked to him, awed by his ability to solve the most obtuse historical mystery. I spent some time debating with myself whether the term "desert flowers" sounded too sexist.

Meanwhile, I followed my professor's advice. Having submitted my credentials, I was interviewed by the school's president via Zoom. By July, I

had been promised gainful employment for the upcoming fall semester.

Working with a local realtor online, I secured a place to live. In early August, I yielded to destiny's call.

First impressions left me underwhelmed. The town was even smaller than I had feared. That said, most indigenous life forms were reasonably friendly. Well, mostly. On the first day, while shopping at the local grocery store—the only one for over fifty miles—an older lady came up to me and exclaimed, "You must be the young man they recently hired out at the college."

"Uh, yes, I am." I was unused to being accosted by elderly strangers.

"My sources tell me you'll be a history instructor," she gleefully informed me.

“Well, actually, it’s a history professor,” I corrected her.

“Oh, there’s a difference?” She looked puzzled.

Thinking about my plan to become an internationally famous author, I realized at that moment my stay here would be brief. However, it might feel like forever.

As I was waiting in the checkout line, my eyes were drawn to a row of ferns for sale by the entrance. They reminded me of small, green oases in an otherwise beige desert.

On impulse, I decided to purchase one. I wheeled my cart over to make a selection. One of the stock boys seemed to think this meant I was going to bolt out the door without paying, cart and all.

“Excuse me, sir, where do you think you’re going?”

“Would you believe, to buy a fern?” I pointed at the plants.

“Well, okay then,” he replied. He stayed there, like Lurch, staring at me suspiciously, all pimples and peach fuzz. Contemplating his existence for a few seconds, I decided his family tree probably resembled a flagpole.

Afterward, back in my tiny efficiency apartment, I placed my new companion on a small table in front of the only window. I had read somewhere that talking to your plants helped them grow. I stood there, wondering how to initiate a one-sided conversation. Would it have preferred pronouns? I silently put away my purchases.

The next morning, I reported to college for faculty orientation. I was assigned a windowless office space.

My desk chair squeaked when I sat in it and had a permanent

tilt. Flipping the light switch caused a single neon tube to flutter into incandescence, making an annoying hum.

After a couple of missteps, I located the bookstore. Presenting my new identity badge, I was issued my teaching manuals. Checking prices, I resolved to purchase my office supplies at the dollar store back in town.

Next, I introduced myself to my assigned academic mentor, E.W. Grisham. He sized me up with the jaded, cynical eyes of a twenty-year veteran.

“The first thing to remember about this job is, it’s long on prestige and short on cash,” he drawled.

I immediately liked his attitude.

“All power on campus resides in the admin building,” he cautioned. “Don’t flunk anything

above a fifty. Grade on a curve."

I scowled. "Why?"

"If you flunk too many of these monkeys, nobody will sign up for your courses. No students, no classes. No job. It's a linear progression."

E.W. taught economics and political science.

The entrance to the faculty building was at a right angle to the door to my small office. As I was about to step into my space, a tornado blew through the building's entry and struck me.

"What the freak?!" I exclaimed. A paper explosion was slowly descending around me. Turning around, I first saw a disheveled mass of brown hair. Beneath this mane, blue statement glasses, framing hazel eyes, were sitting askew on the bridge of a slim nose.

“I am so sorry! I’m running late, classes start up next week, I still have to review the new textbook, and I have all these lab results to sort,” she gushed.

I stood there, mute, staring like a deer in the headlights. It was as if the universe skipped a beat.

“It’s no problem. Really,” I murmured.

I stooped down to help her gather up papers.

“Not the best way to meet someone,” she observed. “It’s cliché, but anyway, my name is Callie Preston.” Not waiting for my response, she continued, “I’m guessing you’re the new social sciences instructor.”

“It’s Professor.” Hopefully, this wasn’t becoming a habit. “Just guessing here, but I would

bet you're a science instructor."

"Why? Glasses give me away?" She giggled. "And actually, I'm a professor. Professor." She adjusted her corrective lenses in a manner I instantly labeled adorable.

"My bad. I hadn't expected to meet another doctor here," I explained.

"Well, surprise, you're not as rare as you consider yourself. There are a few of us around campus. You're cute when flustered." She glanced at her wristwatch. "I have to run, burning daylight. Nice to meet you. Good luck."

As quickly as she arrived, Callie was gone. For some inexplicable reason, my face felt frozen. Later, seeing my reflection in my car's window, I realized I was wearing an inane grin.

The next few days blurred together. Taking attendance, assigning seats—yes, I am *that* professor—reading ahead in our texts, making lesson plans, creating weekly quizzes (refer to the seating). It was amazing how much of this stuff I had forgotten, being a grad student.

Some of this would make great material for Captain Bravo's adventures, I mused.

A couple of weeks into the semester, E.W. and I were walking to our classes when we heard a commotion coming from a classroom beside us.

"Students already protesting the cafeteria fare?" I humorously opined.

"Nope. That's Mr. Grand's first period. Intro to State Government, I believe."

I could hear students yelling, laughing, clapping, and even whistling. Then I heard a bell

ringing, like the ones used by Salvation Army members.

“What the heck is he doing? Teaching them how to riot?” I wondered.

“Daily quiz,” my mentor explained. “He goes over the previous lecture. Then he chooses a student and asks a question. If the answer is correct, he rings the bell and throws them a piece of candy. Buys bags of the stuff at the dollar store. Sometimes he will throw in a cheap toy. Monkeys love it.”

I mentally compared his circus to my collection of somnambulants.

“Guess he must be popular around campus,” I muttered.

“Oh yeah. At registration, his classes always fill up first. People like you and me get the late risers.”

That explained so much. I had seen Mr. Grand in passing. He was tall, buff, good-looking, probably a jock.

“Bet the coeds are obsessed with him,” I caustically ventured.

“Must be. Married his second one this past spring.”

I stared at E.W. I didn’t see any humor in his expression.

“Holy crap! Aren’t there laws about that sort of thing?” I asked incredulously.

“Not that anybody has ever pressed.”

With that, my mentor walked off to his class. I stood there, contemplating the inherent inequality of the universe.

In my third week as a professor, I discovered what a haboob is. (Minds out of the gutter, class.) Per usual, I was working late. I heard the wind blowing

outside, but paid no attention. I was warned. On his way out, E.W. stuck his head in my office.

“Dust blowing today. Hope you replaced your car’s air filter.”

Blissfully ignorant, busy grading quizzes, I didn’t look up.

“Yeah, yeah. See you tomorrow.”

When I left to go home, the parking lot was brown with dirt in the air. Scurrying to my trusty steed, I hurriedly jumped in and pushed the start button.

Old Faithless gasped, sighed, and then, nothing. Repeated angry jabs to the button yielded no improvement.

Having passed similarly unfortunate people in these circumstances, I knew I should raise the hood. Question: how?

Getting out, I dutifully searched both the front bumper and the grill. Not one hood opening button. I stood, baffled, as grit pried into every orifice on my body.

“Having trouble?” a voice inquired.

I turned, and Callie asked, “Car won’t start?”

“Nope,” I replied in despair.

“Let me guess. No one told you to replace your old air filter?” she opined.

I gave her my best puppy-needs-a-home look.

“Won’t be able to get help this late,” she informed me.

An offer of a ride home was gratefully accepted. After getting in her car, she handed me a business card for a local mechanic and cautioned me not to haggle over the fee.

“Why not?”

“Because he’s the only mechanic.”

“For fifty miles?” I interjected.

“Well, I was going to say with a shop, but yeah, that too.” We both laughed.

When we arrived at my domicile, I knew manners dictated that I invite Callie in, but all I wanted at this point was to get in the shower and wash off some grit. To my annoyance, she accepted my invitation.

Inside, Callie’s eyes curiously scanned my tiny efficiency. “Okay, I like the fern. Something to remind you of home?” She smiled.

“It was an impulse purchase.”

I was tired, itchy, and under physical and psychological

duress. I was not in a good place for a prolonged conversation.

Ignoring my signal, she asked, “Do you know ferns are fractals?”

Was I obligated to give her my fern in return for safe conduct home? Was this rural social etiquette?

“Uh, no. Is that a taxonomic classification?” *You can’t have my roommate. We’ve bonded.*

She tilted her head, looking at me. “You don’t get out of the social sciences department much, do you?”

Heeding Mr. Colton’s advice, I silently stared back.

“Fractals are geometric shapes or objects that display self-similarity,” she explained.

I continued channeling Mr. Colton.

Observing my struggle, she continued. “If you clipped off part of one of the fronds, then magnified that piece under a microscope, it would look like a miniature frond. That’s self-similarity.”

“So, I guess raindrops must also be fractals,” I volunteered. (Mr. Colton looked appalled.)

“Well, no. However, their disbursement patterns are sometimes fractal. Rain results from atmospheric convection, which is a type of strange attractor. And since strange attractors are sometimes fractals, I guess you’re in the ballpark. Sort of,” she added generously.

It felt like that time I was awarded the "Also Participated" trophy.

“That’s, uh, fascinating. Really.” I had no idea what she was talking about.

“From all those papers you were carrying, I guess you have a lot of lab stuff to grade. Or sort.” Something, anything?

“Always. One of the joys of teaching,” she responded ironically.

Callie looked at me for a moment and started grinning. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those nerds who wear superhero jammies and play computer games all night. Am I keeping you from your little online friends?”

“Well, of course... not!” I stuttered.

“Shower, supper, and hit the rack. Lots going on in the history department.”

“Oh? Revising American history again, are we?” She grinned even more.

“I teach World Civilization, too. Constantly evolving

subject." I attempted a sagacious look.

"Uh-huh. Well, good night. And you're welcome." She finally left.

Later, after a long shower, while my soup heated in the microwave, I poured myself a tall glass of Dr. Pepper. Over the rocks, of course.

Screwing the cap back on the liter bottle, I set it in the cupboard. Laying out some saltines for the soup, I carefully folded the plastic wrapping and placed the package on a shelf in the refrigerator. Standing there in my Spider-Man jammies, I scratched my chin. Why did I find Callie Preston so strangely attractive? And distracting?

My alarm went off. Dang. Running late for my D&D session.

Over the next few weeks, I only passed Callie occasionally in

the halls between classes. E.W. continued to monitor my endeavors and offer little life lessons. Once, I complained to him about our abysmal wages.

“You know how to make a small fortune in this town?” I looked at him expectantly. “Start with a big one.”

Still, I wasn’t worried. Captain Bravo’s adventures were going to deliver me from penury. Even though progress on that front had been modest so far. *Imagine, and it will come,* I told myself.

About a week before Thanksgiving break, our school’s president called a faculty meeting. Running late, only a few seats were still open when I arrived. Hurriedly settling in one near the back, my neighbor jokingly inquired, “Running fashionably late today, are we?”

Callie raised an eyebrow.

“Busy grading midterms,” I responded. “Always something to do in social sciences,” I added.

“I figured you were lost in some online game,” she teased.

“I never play games at school,” I avowed before realizing.

“I knew it. You’re a game boy!” she chortled.

I fumed. “Yeah? Well, a person needs some distraction to take their mind away from this hayseed hacienda.” (Mr. Colton rolled his eyes.)

Suddenly, a serious look came over Callie’s face. The light, which had been coruscating off her eyes, turned stormy.

“Some of us are grateful to be here. You, of all people, should appreciate this opportunity,” she emphasized.

“Yeah, right,” I retorted.

“Seriously? Most people with a social science degree wind up working at a window, asking, ‘Would you like ketchup with that?’”

“I have a PhD,” I replied.

Okay, so I’m not a pressure person. (Mr. Colton face-palmed.)

“Do you even know what PhD stands for?” Callie demanded.

Intuitively, I knew I wouldn’t like the answer. But like it or not, I was riding this tiger. “What?”

“Piled Higher and Deeper,” she sneered.

I stared at her. The sacrilege.

“Honestly, you are such a naif. An ungrateful, entitled numbskull,” she amended.

Turning her head away from me, she refused to talk anymore.

(Mr. Colton made an L sign on his forehead at me.)

I wandered in the valley of discombobulation for days after that.

Eventually, I presented my case to E.W.

“Well, she’s right about our field, you know. Lots of candidates, few openings. It’s the old joke.”

I gave him a blank look.

“We’re getting poorer by degrees.”

He walked off to his office.
This is my font of wisdom?

The next morning, my green companion and I left town.

I received a peck on both cheeks from my happy mother. My friend, however, was eyed suspiciously. “I sincerely hope that thing didn’t bring any hitchhikers.”

“No, Mother, I made a thorough inspection before we came.”

I didn’t, but I also knew my mom only kept plastic and silk flora in her house. As the weather was chilly, I promised the fern would stay in my room. She could fumigate when we left.

“Looks like you have been eating nothing but Ramen noodles,” she observed with a worried look.

I swore to her that only healthy food passed my lips.

In truth, the laundromat doubled as a pizzeria. The dough was like cardboard; the toppings had all passed their sell-by dates. The usual college fare.

Changing the subject, I asked, “How is Dad doing?”

My mother glanced toward the front room. “Like always. Off on another planet.”

A CPA, my father worked for a state agency. He didn't follow football or any sport, to my knowledge. I had no idea what his interests were. His world remained locked up behind dreamy eyes and a permanent ghost smile.

Probably why I was never a jock, but I can sew circles around most girls.

After dinner and catching up with my mom, I retired to my old room.

Lying in my twin bed that night, for some reason, I felt like a guest in the house where I grew up.

I found myself wondering what Callie was doing. Was she visiting family, too? Watching football or parades on the tube? Maybe eating a lonely TV dinner?

Okay, I admit that the last image was my favorite.

The next day at lunch, I mentioned Callie. (Mr. Colton seemed to have swallowed a bone.)

My mother's eyebrows rose.

"Tell me more about this girl," she demanded.

I spilled my guts. Nothing was too small for my mother's intelligence gathering.

"How many times have I warned you about these kinds of girls? They love getting their hooks into some naïve, successful young man like you. Mark my words, once the money is gone, so are your good times."

She gave me that stern look usually reserved for when she caught me peeking at the lingerie models in some magazine.

"I sincerely hope you're still saying your prayers?"

“Yes, Mother, every night before bed.” *Please, Lord, let one of those women find me.*

It was reminiscent of my student days. With no social life to distract me, I was an honors student.

By the next morning, I was ready to return to the hinterlands. Giving my mother a peck on the cheek and a promise to return for Christmas, I bid my parents goodbye. I vaguely wondered if my father knew I had been there.

On the long drive back, my thoughts again turned to Callie. It was odd, this attraction she had.

Like every guy, I have a type. Lots of peroxide, silicone, and very tiny tan lines. Cheerleaders, sometimes a homecoming queen.

Return trips always feel shorter. It was still early

afternoon when we arrived back in town.

Puttering around the apartment left me feeling restless. My online friends were off with their families, enduring the holiday. Captain Bravo was, as usual, proving less than inspirational.

Finally, I decided to drive to my office and pick up some texts. If the weekend wasn't going to be fun, at least it could be productive.

The parking lots were empty. Of course. Only a total loser with no family or friends would be here today.

Walking to the faculty building, I heard noise coming from the science labs.

I had stumbled onto a narcotics ring. Probably a rogue chemist, fired from the college, disgraced, getting revenge by

using the school's resources to create illicit wares.

It was fight or flight. I fled.

Maybe there would be a reward for this information. I slowed. I could use my cell phone to film evidence. I stopped.

Visions came to me:

Campus hero.

The president and board of regents, shaking my hand, the youngest tenured professor ever.

E.W. patting my back, looking awed.

Coeds, lining up to register for my classes.

Mr. Grand, standing alone in a corner, looking forlorn, holding his bell limply.

I took stock. Cell phone, charged. Undies, clean. Destiny, take me.

Cautiously, I crept to the entrance. Pushing it open, the bottom rubbed loudly against the threshold. I froze. The noise coming from within continued. No one came to investigate. Probably high off noxious fumes, I reasoned.

Following the sound to an interior door, I paused. Easing out my phone with one hand, I used my other hand to open the portal.

A hinge creaked.

Head on a swivel, I warily entered the room.

Just as I rounded a large cabinet, something metallic flashed before my eyes. If Callie had better depth perception, my head would have scored a home run.

We both screamed.

“Are you trying to kill somebody?!” I shrieked.

“Yes! You!” she yelled back at me. “What in the flip are you doing, sneaking into my lab?!”

“It’s the holidays. Nobody’s supposed to be here.”

“Jumping jackrabbits! I thought some perv was trying to sneak in here on me.”

Again, with that look. The one reserved for the academically feeble.

“What are you doing here today?”

Placing her softball bat on a lab table, Callie adjusted her glasses and tersely replied, “Research.”

“What kind of research, exactly?”

She gave me a hostile look. “I’m sure it’s beneath your interest.”

“You have my undivided attention.”

Callie gave me a curious look.

“Fine. In basic terms, I create weather models to analyze the underlying structure of weather systems. Since the discovery of the Lorenz attractor, models have only predicted weather in short-term windows. I’m trying to find a new strange attractor that will allow us to form long-term predictions. Especially about climate change.”

My eyes glazed over. “Wow. That’s like fringe stuff.”

“How many times have I heard that?” she sighed. “That’s why I’m grateful to be here. My work isn’t exactly trending at any of the big universities,” she added dourly.

“I came here today to pick up my textbooks so I could get started on final exams. When I heard the

noise coming from your lab, I thought I should investigate. Why are you here?”

“Because this is the only time I get the lab to myself. No students, staff, or distractions.”

Callie must have intuited something in my look.

“And yes, I have a family. Two, for your information. My parents divorced ages ago. I assure you, I don’t need rescuing from my lonely lab, Professor.”

“I never implied that,” I protested.

“Sure. And what look were you giving me? You were thinking it.”

“Was not!” (Mr. Colton was packing his valise.)

“Were too.”

I’m not sure about my pants, but my face was burning. “Why do you always twist everything I say into something I never meant?”

“Is it my fault you have difficulty communicating?”

Floored, flummoxed, a long way from Mother’s skirts, I turned feral.

“Well, I think you’re awesome!” (Mr. Colton fainted.)

Callie looked startled. We both stood there in stunned silence. Finally, she broke the hush.

“Awkward. Not sure what to say to that. Um, thanks?”

She was staring at me like some alien specimen.

Primal instinct kicked in again. Ignoring social etiquette, or anything connoting reason, I fled.

I spent the remainder of that long, miserable holiday closeted in my apartment.

The town was landlocked, so I couldn't run away to sea. The security of the parental nest had lost its appeal. I felt as if I no longer belonged anywhere. I thought of ducking out the following Monday, calling in sick. But what remained of my self-esteem refused.

I took roll call, gave lectures, and hid out in my office between classes.

The faculty and students were so busy with their own dramas that no one noticed. Class, office, home. Like being stuck in a time-space loop. Weeks passed.

I completed my course objectives and readied paperwork for administration. I prayed daily not to see Callie. The thought of her condescending smile sent me into mini panic attacks.

Near the end of the term, E.W. stopped me in the hallway.

“Been noticing, you seem off your feed lately. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Need to finish grading exams, turn in my paperwork to the bureaucrats.”

I just wanted him to go away, leave me alone.

My mentor gave me a searching look.

“Well, you know I’m here. No answers, but I’m here.”

“Thanks, I appreciate you.” I was picking up the local lingua franca.

Lately, I had tentatively decided to resign my position and join the French Foreign Legion.

That afternoon, I graded blue books. This time, I employed leniency, a first for me.

To my astonishment, I was discovering empathy for people who didn't share my passion for history. Only a few committed slackers failed. Somehow, I doubted they cared.

In my newfound clarity, I realized students only took my classes because they had to. All because some governing entity required history as part of a degree plan.

On the last day of term, I walked to the Administration office and handed in my grade books. I said hello and exchanged seasonal greetings with the staff.

Back in my office, I boxed my books and papers, and a couple of personal items. Looking around the small room once more, I flicked the light switch off.

It felt like a chapter in my life was coming to an end.

I turned to walk out the door. Callie was standing there, watching me. I briefly pictured myself wearing a Foreign Legion uniform.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you. You're sure jumpy. Everything okay?”

Emotions rattled me like a hurricane.

“I’m fine. Great. I’m super great. You know what I mean.”

“Looks like you’re done for the semester. Now you can fly this dust stop.”

“Yeah,” I answered noncommittally.

“Look, before you leave, I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

I gave her a quizzical look.

“For how I reacted the last time we spoke. You caught me by surprise. I wasn’t expecting that because, let’s face it, you and I have a chemistry like oil and water.”

She stopped like I was supposed to say something.

“I’ll admit, we don’t seem to mix well,” I owned.

Silence.

“So, lesson learned.” I hoisted my box. “Just on my way out. Got to finish packing so I can visit my family.”

Callie had a look of bewilderment.

“See? You give very mixed signals. When I visited you in your apartment, it was like you couldn’t wait to give me the bum’s rush. Then in the lab, you say I’m great. Now you act like you can’t wait to get away from me, again.”

My tongue refused to budge. My brain was gear-jamming.

“Goodbye.” She turned to walk away.

(Mr. Colton smirked at me.)

“Wait! I do think you’re awesome. And I wish I could get to know you better. And believe it or not, I don’t have a lot of experience with girls. Women,” I quickly amended.

Callie turned back. “I’d never have guessed, Professor.”

Really? That obvious?

“I like you, I guess I just don’t communicate that very effectively,” I added lamely.

She came up to me and placed a hand on my arm.

“Look, we both have places to go at the moment. How about after the holidays, you give me a

bell, and we'll try to have a real conversation, alright?"

At that moment, I wanted to promise her things I'd never have. (Mr. Colton used his thumb to draw a line across his throat.) Message received.

We traded phone numbers. I promised to call her on Christmas Eve. She said New Year's was better. I didn't argue.

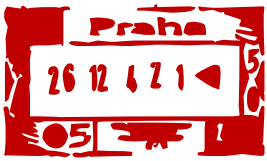
When we parted, I felt as if I were walking on clouds.

I drove to my castle in a daze. Even Mr. Colton smiled. Well, that or his face broke.

Bursting into our home, I informed my silent companion, "She likes me, she flipping likes me!"

I did a little happy dance around the table.

My fractal friend said nothing, of course. But that was okay too, because I knew our relationship had progressed to the next level.



DIVERGING DIAMOND

By Cangrande della Scala

A corridor in four jurisdictions, three weather systems, and one animal nobody can identify

WESTBOUND TRAFFIC: KEEP LEFT

EASTBOUND TRAFFIC: KEEP RIGHT

The arrows point at one another.

This is not a metaphor.

It is a road.

2016 / 2022 / 2026

The first drawing showed the road as it was.

Two lanes westbound. Two lanes eastbound. A median full of weeds and fast-food wrappers. The mall on one side, the big-box stores on the other. Cars entering the corridor with the tired obedience of blood entering a vein.

The second drawing showed the road as it would be.

The lines crossed.

Not metaphorically. Not as an artist's attempt to express confusion.

The westbound lanes slid across the eastbound lanes, briefly placing every driver on the wrong side of the road before returning them, chastened, to the correct side.

The engineer said the design reduced conflict points.

A woman in the back asked what a conflict point was.

He turned the drawing around.

She said attractor the way other people say home.

Then she said the word that made the first word honest:

Strange.

You can watch a system repeat itself at a size that humiliates the original.

You can name the repetition and still be inside it.

In 2016, the estimate was thirty-five million dollars.

In 2022, it was fifty-seven.

In 2026, the person who knew where the revised estimate was had retired.

The binder remained in a locked cabinet in an office that no longer existed.

Four municipal seals appeared on the same permit:

Bangor.

Veazie.

Orono.

Old Town.

Four dates had been stamped over one another.

None of them agreed to be the original.

At the bottom, someone had written:

CONSTRUCTION TO BEGIN WHEN CONDITIONS PERMIT.

No one knew which conditions.

The paper is one paper.

The paper is also four papers.

This is not a metaphor.

This is how the corridor files itself.

THE RIBBON

The ribbon-cutting took place beside a chain-link fence.

Nobody wanted to hold it.

In the photo, the ribbon looks like a wound that attended its own press conference.

Behind the fence, the former Sears continued to exist under insurance-grade climate control.

The sign had been removed, leaving a pale rectangle on the brick like a missing tooth.

Inside, beneath a skylight, a fern grew from a crack near the service elevators.

Nobody had planted it.

A man with a microphone thanked the county, the state, the contractors, the consultants, the taxpayers, the voters, and the future residents of the mixed-income housing that would eventually occupy the mall.

He did not thank the fern.

The hum is not loud.

The hum is the kind of sound a building makes when it has been told it is still a building.

THE NOTE

A note was found behind the mall inside a jar sealed with wax.

The jar had been wrapped in a municipal trash bag, placed in a milk crate, and buried beneath a concrete slab poured over the original drainage map.

The note read:

A town is what remains when every object has been asked to leave.

Below that:

DO NOT OPEN UNTIL THE ROAD IS READY.

Below that, in another hand:

THE ROAD IS NEVER READY.

The note was catalogued as construction debris.

The jar was not.

Self-similarity.

Same shape.

Wrong scale.

No longer cute.

5:52 P.M. // CORNERSTONE FELLOWSHIP, PARKING LOT C

The worship band is soundchecking.

The drummer counts through a headset microphone:

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

The count is a four trying to become an eight, trying to become forever.

The keyboardist enters in the wrong key.

The guitarist continues as if this were a test.

Greeters in matching blue polos.

Earpieces already live.

The language of spiritual protection is loaded before the sky has done anything a sky could be sued for.

“Big weather coming,” says one.

“Hedge of protection,” says another.

The phrase travels through the lot like a password.

A security volunteer, formerly an off-duty deputy, places one hand on his belt.

The hand arrives before the thought.

At 5:57, Pastor Milt answers his phone.

“We’ve prayed for worse,” he says.

He means it as comfort.

Behind him, the band finds the chorus.

Above him, something bright moves inside the bruise-colored sky.

Nobody looks up at first.

The parking lot has been designed to keep people looking down.

The sky over Hogan Road became the color of an old bruise.

Dusk is a poorly supervised crayon.

It smears.

It does not ask.

6:11 P.M. // HIGH IMPORTANCE

A city planner sends an email.

Temporary lane shifts may create unusual driver behavior during the initial construction period.

Drivers are encouraged to remain calm and follow posted signage.

The email is forwarded to seven people.

One is dead.

One has moved to Florida.

One is the fern.

One is the junior engineer, who has not yet been born.

The remaining three are copied by accident.

The email had been hot in another hour.

The kindness was the part that did not survive the trip.

7:08 P.M. // THE DRAINAGE DITCH

Something comes out of the drainage ditch behind the former Sears.

It has a plastic bag caught around one hind leg.

It stops, lifts the leg, examines the bag, and continues.

The neighborhood calls it Chad.

The first person who saw it said, “Hey, Chad,” and the name survived repetition, error, and the absence of a better option.

Chad has been seen in the drainage channels, behind MooseMart, beside the loading docks, beneath the bridge, and once in the vestibule of a nail salon.

Chad has no permanent address.

Chad has several regular routes.

A woman from Cornerstone Fellowship waves.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad!”

Chad looks toward her.

She smiles, relieved.

He continues walking.

Chad is the shape of Chad repeating at the scale of a year.

He has been the corridor’s unofficial traffic-calming

device since before the diamond had a name.

Children have drawn him.

A Facebook group has him in the banner and argues, daily, about whether he is the same Chad as the Chad of 2019.

He is.

He isn’t.

In the official report, Chad is described as an otter.

In a second report, Chad is described as a moose.

In a third, he is described as an animal of uncertain classification, possibly enlarged by atmospheric conditions.

The camp behind the Sears calls him Chad.

The camp is never asked to clarify.

The corridor cannot agree on the color of the sky.

The corridor cannot agree on the number of legs.

The corridor agrees on the name.

The name is the median.

Everything else is a merge.

THE BOX ON HAMMOND STREET

She drew it on a napkin that kept trying to drink the ink.

Two wings. A hole that was not a hole. A weather that would not agree to be weather.

The napkin is in a box if the box is still paid for.

Hammond Street.

A unit with a padlock that remembers more hands than a padlock should.

The ink still has the shape.

The marriage does not appear in the box.

The fern he used to talk to does not appear in the box.

The dust does.

The dust is not listed on the inventory.

The dust does not need to be.

I fled.

The sentence is shorter than the act.

The act had a parking lot in it, empty, and a sky the color of a

bad filling, and wind moving trash in a circle that wanted to be believed.

“Time-space loop,” he told the fern, because the fern would not file a grievance.

Then he left the fern in the window.

Leaving is also a pattern.

Patterns prefer to look like decisions.

The act had a parking lot in it, empty, and a sky the color of a bad filling, but the wind moved the lot’s trash in a straight line toward the drains.

8:14 P.M. // HOGAN ROAD, WESTBOUND

A lifted Ram crosses Hogan Road in the wrong lane before the road has officially become the wrong lane.

Stack pipes. A decal of a screaming eagle. Tires that have never encountered a surface they could not regard as an insult.

The driver sees a cyclist.

The cyclist sees the truck.

The truck rolls coal.

This is not exactly malice. Malice requires concentration.

This is a signature. A man confirming he still exists by dirtying the air another person has to use.

The driver listens to a recording that begins as CB

chatter and ends as a social-
media sound:

—anybody got eyes on the merge—

—bro, you can't trust a road
that crosses itself—

—sit down, Major, sit all the
way down—

A white light opens over the
mall.

The driver assumes fireworks.

Then he assumes someone else's
insurance problem.

He does not brake.

Chad stands on the median.

The driver brakes for Chad.

The truck lurches.

The cyclist swears.

The animal stares into the cab with an expression that might be judgment or indigestion.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad!” the driver shouts.

The cyclist, coughing in the diesel cloud, shouts it too.

For four seconds they agree.

Then the road divides them.

The greeting goes up from Lot C, from the Ram, from Section F, from the Spark car, from the camp, from the church people coming out first, from the truck driver stopped at the barricade, from the teenagers returning with phones raised, from Arun arriving on foot, from Mercy and Saint beside the camp, from the drainage ditch, from the empty

road beyond the barricade, where no one stood.

AISLE FOUR

Pour the Reign Storm, crown cracked, guava howlin' in the can,

rip the WITHOUT pouch—margarita with no plan,

three-pack SunnyD, eighty percent vitamin lie,

freeze-and-squeeze the ICEE, cola apocalypse on ice—

Sit down, Major.

Sit all the way down.

Fifty-three and slicker than the shelf tag says I'm not,

otter in the aisle, whiskers
wet, metabolism shot,

splash of Five O'Clock 'cause
the clock's the only boss I
clock,

chewin' on a chocolate square
that ain't chocolate, watch me
talk—

in circles for the next eleven
hours, guaranteed,

mechanical bull under me, saddle
slicked in bargain-brand grease

so bright the EPA's gonna send
somebody down—

I ain't Major.

I'm the reason Major had to sit
down.

Sunny D said eighty percent, I said prove it.

WITHOUT said no alcohol, I said watch me disprove it.

Tore the spout off with my teeth, chased it with the Storm.

Security's already radioing:

Code Otter.

Form up.

Form up.

$1.25 unless otherwise marked.

And brother—

I am always otherwise marked.

The recording was made in the MooseMart parking lot by a man named Dale, who claimed not to know the otter.

Everyone knew Dale knew the otter.

Dale discovered that his phone's recorder could make an animal sound like a prophet trapped inside a vending machine.

The track circulated for three weeks.

Then the mall construction began.

Then Chad disappeared.

Then the track returned from an unknown number at 8:22 p.m., playing through the Ram's cracked speaker.

Nobody in the truck remembered downloading it.

Dale had discovered that his phone's voice recorder could make an animal sound like a

prophet trapped inside a vending machine.

He had added the beat later, using a free application and the rhythm of the automatic doors.

9:03 P.M. // BLUETOOTH TO THE MOTHERLAND

Arun is driving a compact hatchback with a lukewarm delivery bag on the passenger seat.

He is speaking to his mother in a language the new interchange signage does not accommodate.

He has already rerouted three times around the construction, the cones, and a temporary sign that says:

MERGE LEFT

MERGE RIGHT

LOCAL ACCESS ONLY

THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE

The final line was installed by mistake.

His mother asks if he has eaten.

He says yes.

He has not.

A white light moves over the mall.

“What is that?” she asks.

“Nothing,” he says.

This is not denial.

It is translation.

He watches the light reflected in the windshield and takes the

next exit before the road can cross itself.

At the bottom of the ramp, Chad steps into the headlights.

Arun slows.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad,” he says.

His mother laughs through the phone.

He tells her about the animal.

She asks if it is dangerous.

“No,” he says. “He knows where he is going.”

This is the only testimony in the corridor that will later prove completely accurate.

No one asks for it.

10:55 P.M. // MOOSE MART, SECTION F

Five teenagers stand around a shopping-cart corral.

None has bought anything.

All five phones are recording.

“Say something,” one says.

“About what?”

“Whatever happens.”

Nothing happens.

The doors open.

The doors close.

A woman comes out carrying a bag of ice and stares at the sky.

One teenager zooms in.

“Look at that.”

“What?”

“Right there.”

“It’s a reflection.”

“Of what?”

“Your face.”

They laugh too loudly.

The light above the mall widens.

The doors open.

The doors close.

A man exits carrying a bottle of vodka and a box of Ex-Lax.

He sees Chad.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad.”

The five teenagers lower their phones for four full seconds.

Then they raise them again.

“I think we’re going viral,” one says.

“You have to be alive first,” says another.

Neither believes this.

The light above the mall became the color of a bad filling.

The wind moved the lot’s trash in a circle, then forgot the circle.

11:40 P.M. // THE CAMP BEHIND THE FORMER SEARS

Six people live beneath a patched tarp stretched between a light pole and the frame of an abandoned bus shelter.

They call the camp the Weather Desk.

They collect receipts, dead batteries, broken eyeglasses, coupons for restaurants that have closed, and the plastic tags used to identify lumber.

They know what the town has thrown away because the town throws away its explanations first.

Mercy was once a claims adjuster.

Saint repaired HVAC systems in the mall.

Junior was born after the mall stopped being a mall but still dreams about escalators.

At 11:40, Saint hears the first crack.

Not an explosion.

The sound of a container remembering it is temporary.

“Here it comes,” Mercy says.

“What comes?” Junior asks.

Mercy looks toward the white light.

“Everything that was filed wrong.”

The jar splits beneath the concrete.

Across Hogan Road, the worship band stops playing.

The truck driver stops laughing.

Arun stops speaking to his mother.

The teenagers stop filming.

The camp stands.

Chad emerges from beneath a utility trailer.

The plastic bag is gone from his leg.

He is carrying a receipt in his mouth.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad,” Mercy says.

Chad drops the receipt.

It lands face-up.

The receipt is dated June 14, 2016.

It lists one item:

FUTURE ACCESS

The price is blank.

The jar was sealed with wax and wrapped in a municipal trash bag.

The trash bag had been placed inside a milk crate.

The milk crate had been buried beneath a concrete slab.

The slab had been poured over the original drainage map.

The note was catalogued as construction debris.

The jar was not.

THE REPORTS // 11:47 P.M.

For three seconds, the reports match.

At 11:47 p.m., material falls from the sky onto Hogan Road,

where it accumulates in the unfinished crossing.

This is the only agreed-upon account.

Then the reports separate again.

CORNERSTONE FELLOWSHIP

At approximately 11:47 p.m., the undersigned observed a luminous event above the former Sears structure.

The event was interpreted by several congregants as a possible spiritual confirmation.

No injuries were reported.

A local animal, believed to be an otter, was observed moving through the parking lot.

Multiple witnesses greeted the animal by name.

HOGAN ROAD

At approximately 11:47 p.m., the undersigned observed an unidentified aerial flare.

The undersigned's vehicle experienced temporary loss of traction due to foreign material on roadway.

The driver did not stop until directed by a traffic-control device.

A cyclist reported seeing an otter.

Statement not pursued.

SPARK DELIVERY

At approximately 11:47 p.m., while traveling southbound, I saw a light over the building.

My mother was on the phone.

There was material falling from the sky.

I turned before the lanes crossed.

The otter was there.

He was not afraid.

MOOSE MART

At approximately 11:47 p.m., five juveniles were present in Section F.

All juveniles possessed cellular devices.

All juveniles reported an event but disagreed about its nature.

One juvenile stated that the otter was “the only real thing.”

No juvenile could clarify.

UNAUTHORIZED ENCAMPMENT

At approximately 11:47 p.m., the sealed object opened.

The road was ready.

The road was never ready.

Chad was present.

No one asked him anything.

Unanimity, in a place that has survived by not agreeing, means the system has found a truth large enough to crush the filing cabinets into a single drawer.

THE CROSSOVER

A diverging diamond asks a driver to occupy, briefly, the side that incoming traffic would have used.

The mistake is the design.

The correction is the safety feature.

The correction is promised.

The binder containing the correction is in a truck.

The truck is not here.

The historian stands beside the chain-link fence and watches a feral fern push through the uncured concrete.

“You don’t get out of the social sciences department much, do you?” says the project supervisor.

The sentence arrives from another story.

The warmth has been removed.

The historian thinks of the woman with the napkin.

The fern in the window.

The dust in the box on Hammond Street.

He almost says her name.

He almost says strange attractor.

Instead he says, “The ferns will come up through it if you don’t seal the joints.”

The supervisor looks at him as if he has mistaken weather for evidence.

The junior engineer crouches beside the concrete.

He writes the cost overrun on his wrist:

1.62857.

The decimal continues beyond the skin.

The fern continues beneath the road.

The cart, empty and correct, begins to roll.

The sky opens sideways.

For an instant, everyone in the corridor sees the same thing:

A long interior hallway lined with doors.

Every door bears the same number.

Every number has been crossed out.

Then the hallway collapses.

The rain begins.

It is black but not wet.

Carbon paper.

Receipt tape.

Dollar-store Bible pages.

Old lease agreements.

A child’s drawing of a house with four windows.

A contractor’s glove.

A fern frond.

The materials strike the pavement and skitter toward the drains.

The drains reject them.

The roads were built to move water away.

They were not built to move memory.

The pastor says hedge.

The deputy’s hand completes its sentence.

The Ram does not brake.

Arun says to his mother, still in the same sentence, “I am fine.”

The teenagers film.

The camp pulls a child beneath a tarp.

The animal screams through the dead speaker:

I ain’t Major.

I’m the reason Major had to sit down.

Chad lifts his head in the median.

Every constituency says:

“Hiiii, Chaaaad.”

The words do not come back.

The words come back.

Both of these are true in the four seconds.

The otter is in the aisle.

The otter is on the pallets.

The otter is in the song.

The otter is the road's opinion of itself.

The otter is not the road.

12:04 A.M. // THE LIGHT

The light strikes the interchange.

There is no sound.

The concrete folds along its painted seams.

The crossing rises enough to expose the dirt beneath it.

Rebar lifts like roots.

A traffic signal swings in the air, red light blinking over the empty lanes.

The mall windows light at once.

Inside the former Sears, the fern releases a cloud of spores.

They move through the dead escalators, across the gutted cosmetics counters, into the empty food court, and out through the broken skylight.

A frond pushes through the uncured concrete.

Then another.

Then another.

The interchange remains standing.

It simply no longer leads anywhere.

The fern was never a bit.

The empty lot was never just Texas.

I fled was never an ending.

It was a merge arrow painted in a color the night has since eaten.

Chad enters the middle of the crossing.

The lights change.

Red.

Yellow.

Green.

No cars move.

Chad sits beneath the green light and cleans one paw.

Or hoof.

Or whatever part of him the reports have agreed not to name.

The church people come out first.

The truck driver stops at the barricade.

The teenagers return, phones raised.

Arun arrives on foot.

Mercy and Saint stand beside the camp.

Someone says it.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad.”

The greeting passes through the ruined lanes.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad.”

The sound comes back from the mall.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad.”

It comes from the drainage ditch.

“Hiiii, Chaaaad.”

It comes from the empty road beyond the barricade, where no one stands.

For four seconds, every voice in the corridor matches.

Then the lights go out.

That is not the same thing as a death.

Do not file it as a death yet.

The four towns will try.

They will fail in four directions.

MORNING // OR THE NEXT ITERATION

The corridor is empty in the way a corridor is empty when the emptiness has been paid for with a night.

Orange becomes honest again.

The cones are just cones.

The hum in the Sears has gone back to insurance.

A tarp flaps and is only plastic.

In the morning, the town produces six explanations:

A sinkhole.

A gas main.

A sinkhole caused by a gas main.

A communications failure.

An act of vandalism.

An opportunity for redevelopment.

The county promises a full investigation.

The state thanks drivers for their patience.

Cornerstone Fellowship posts photographs of the light.

The teenagers post the same photographs with music over them.

The truck driver posts nothing.

Arun calls his mother.

The pastor will say we've prayed for worse again on Sunday, and it will still be comfort, and comfort will still be real, and

the monument-sign fern will still be the well-behaved child, and a few people in Lot C will look at the median when they say amen, and they will not say the two words, and the not-saying will be louder than the band.

The camp is asked to move.

They move a little.

They still know the weather.

They still are not filed.

They find a place in the drainage channel where the black rain has collected.

They fill three shopping carts with it and push them toward the river.

The shopping cart with the broken wheel remembers the route.

It knows every slope.

It knows which fences lean.

It knows the difference between a ditch and a road.

The others follow.

At the mall, the fern continues growing through the concrete.

One frond resembles another.

Another resembles the first.

The feral stand is still in the seam.

Greener than it has any right to be.

At the edge of the interchange, traffic officials place new cones around the old cones.

A boy on a bicycle approaches too fast.

His front wheel clips the cart's wheel.

The cart spins.

The boy spins.

The wheel makes a small repeating sound against the pavement.

At the edge of the interchange, Chad stands in the dawn light and watches traffic officials place new cones around the old cones.

Chad turns his head.

From somewhere behind the former Sears, someone calls:

"Hiiii, Chaaaad."

He looks toward the voice.

The road crosses itself.

For a moment, the boy travels the wrong way.

Then the lanes separate.

The morning corrects him.

Chad walks on.

The cart rolls into the culvert.

The fern opens.

The hum returns to the Sears.

Somewhere in a box on Hammond Street, a napkin has absorbed the shape of two wings and a hole that was not a hole.

The ink has not faded.

The marriage is not in the box.

The dust is.

The dust does not need to be.

WESTBOUND TRAFFIC: KEEP LEFT

EASTBOUND TRAFFIC: KEEP RIGHT

The arrows point toward one another.

The correction is the design.

The design is still waiting.

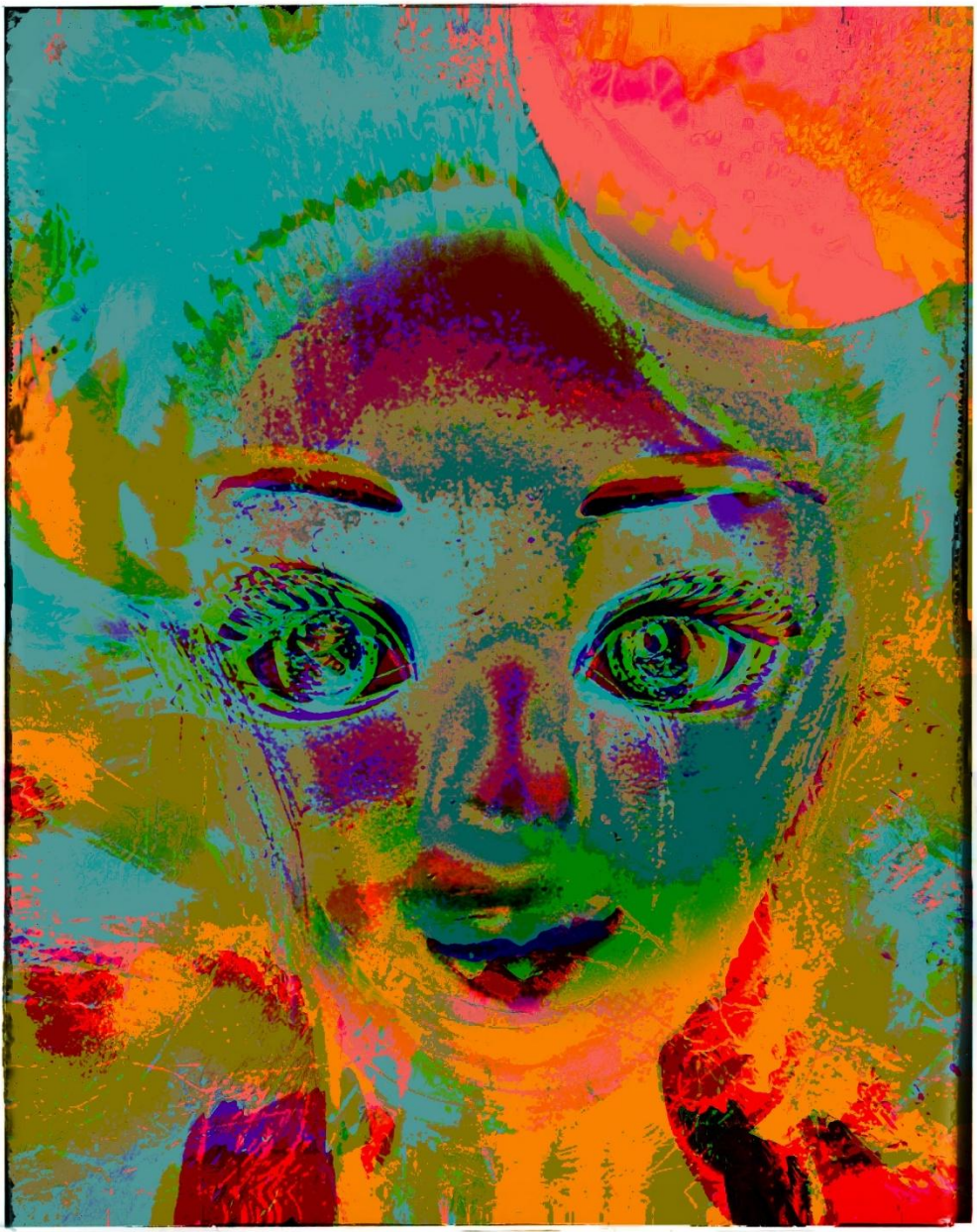
The smallest piece reproduces the shape of the whole.

The correction is promised.

The binder is in a truck.

The truck is not here.

We were inside the small iteration and called it a life.



THE DOLL IS NOT A DOLL

(AN ANATOMY OF THE WHITE HILL IN 27 CUTS, TWO FALSE ENDINGS, ONE UNAUTHORIZED TRAM, AND A SOUND THAT CANNOT PRODUCE IDENTIFICATION)

By Fly-Fornication Enrico Dandolo

CUT 01 — PRICE OF ADMISSION

BLACK.

A cash register opens.

Not a gunshot, although for several seconds everybody in the theater mistakes it for one.

VOICE, OWNER UNKNOWN:

One dollar and twenty-five cents.

CUT TO:

Clara on the hill.

Or Clara as the hill.

Already there is disagreement.

Her blue eyes face the camera with the serenity peculiar to cheap things that have survived the expensive ideologies of their owners.

SUPERIMPOSE:

$1.25

PLUS TAX

PLUS METAPHYSICS

PLUS HISTORY

A hand enters frame holding a graphite pencil.

It draws a line beneath HISTORY.

Another hand, gloved, erases it.

ERR_SEAT_CENTERED:

YOU ARE NOT PASSING JUDGMENT.

YOU ARE SIMPLY HOLDING YOUR POSITION.

CLARA:

Who wrote that?

VOICE:

You did.

CLARA:

I don't write.

VOICE:

That's why we trusted you.

CUT 19 — THE CORRIDOR, EARLIER OR LATER

At 14:03 the door does not open.

The door pivots downward.

Inside the hinge sits a seamstress who has spent thirty-seven years sewing the room to the corridor because Architecture, like very late Frank Lloyd Wright, abandoned

the project before practical completion.

Needle.

Thread.

Needle.

Thread.

Each stitch produces a tiny metallic tram bell.

DING.

DING.

DING.

Then Axel enters wearing a dress from which Time has been professionally removed.

Everyone stares.

AXEL:

What?

ACOUSTICS ENGINEER:

Your dress.

AXEL:

What about it?

ACOUSTICS ENGINEER:

It's watchless.

AXEL:

So are graves.

Nobody writes that down.

Everyone writes that down.

CUT 03 — THE MINISTRY OF BAD LIGHT

Light has misplaced its streetlamp.

It circles Clara in panic.

The Department of Standards issues contradictory instructions:

ILLUMINATE SUBJECT.

CONCEAL MECHANISM.

IMPROVE CONTRAST.

PRESERVE NEUTRALITY.

DO NOT IMPLY MORAL EVALUATION.

MAKE HER BEAUTIFUL.

DELETE PREVIOUS INSTRUCTION.

The lamps obey everything simultaneously.

Clara glows atrociously.

She glows magnificently.

Her cheek carries a scuff shaped like a nation whose borders have been revised so many times the cartographers have developed nervous disorders.

Her mouth is rubbed nearly away.

Tenderness has become statistical noise.

Somebody behind the screen whispers:

“She looks alive.”

The monitor immediately answers:

UNSUPPORTED INFERENCE.

CUT 22 — MÁJ

Night has been waiting impatiently outside the laboratory.

We permit it entry.

Instantly the laboratory is a lake.

Instantly the lake is a laboratory.

Moonlight performs unauthorized surgery on both.

There are reeds growing through the acoustic console. There is an oscilloscope half-submerged in black water. There are trout underneath the administrative filing cabinet, flickering through memoranda concerning the correct definition of trout.

Far away, the old romantic apparatus has assembled itself:

hill,

moon,

water,

bell,

maiden,

criminal,

grave,

May.

But the condemned man has failed to arrive.

Budget cuts.

In his place stands Clara.

Price tag still attached.

$1.25.

The moon examines it.

The moon has no money.

CUT 07 — AXEL'S HAIR

Close-up.

Axel's hair contains a tram.

Not metaphorically.

We tried metaphorically.

It didn't take.

A tiny tram moves through her curls, throwing blue sparks at each intersection of plastic filament. Inside sit fourteen graphite passengers, one seamstress, two gloves, and an

elderly woman who has been missing her stop since 1968.

CONDUCTOR:

Tickets.

OLD WOMAN:

I had one in another political system.

CONDUCTOR:

Destination?

OLD WOMAN:

The future.

CONDUCTOR:

That line was discontinued.

She nods.

Naturally.

Outside the tram window Clara's enormous blue eye passes like a lake.

CUT 04 — PHENOMENOLOGY WITH RECEIPT

The chronicler staggers into frame carrying Husserl under one arm, Deleuze under the other, and a bottle that insists it is not evidence.

CHRONICLER:

One does not simply observe the doll.

CLARA:

Oh, Christ.

CHRONICLER:

The doll observes the observing—

CLARA:

Here we go.

CHRONICLER:

—and within this tautological—

CLARA:

Do you ever look at anything without making it attend graduate school?

Silence.

Somewhere, phenomenology drops a plate.

CLARA:

I'm plastic.

CHRONICLER:

Precisely! The plasticity—

CLARA:

No. Plastic.

She taps her forehead.

TOK.

TOK.

TOK.

Three cheap, devastating knocks against transcendental idealism.

The chronicler drinks.

CUT 15 — MATERIAL EVIDENCE

Tar.

Sand.

Wire.

Ash.

Chalk.

Graphite.

Industrial enamel.

A glove print.

A hair.

A cigarette burn nobody can explain because smoking is forbidden inside the institute.

The Gate of Heights has been constructed from everything painting was told not to be.

From the front: rectangle.

From the side: wound.

From above: administrative misunderstanding.

An art historian enters.

ART HISTORIAN:

Czech Informel.

The Gate spits out a rusty nail.

ART HISTORIAN:

Point taken.

CUT 09 — INTERROGATION OF A FIXED SEAT

CLARA sits beneath a naked bulb.

AXEL circles her.

Except this is false.

Clara circles Axel.

Also false.

The room circles both of them while the dolls remain perfectly still.

AXEL:

Name.

CLARA:

Clara.

AXEL:

Occupation.

CLARA:

Position.

AXEL:

Political affiliation.

CLARA:

Plastic.

AXEL:

Place of manufacture.

CLARA:

You've confused origin with explanation.

AXEL:

Cute.

CLARA:

Price?

AXEL:

Excuse me?

CLARA:

We're reducing objects to their administrative attributes. Let's not get shy halfway through.

Axel smiles.

Or the factory painted something that the light elects to prosecute as a smile.

AXEL:

Fine. What's your price?

CLARA:

One twenty-five.

AXEL:

Cheap goddess.

CLARA:

Expensive witness.

They look at one another.

Behind the glass, seven researchers simultaneously experience the unpleasant suspicion that they are the specimens.

CUT 12 — LAW

A brass plaque:

ONLY SOUND PENETRATES DIRECTLY.

Underneath, somebody has scratched:

PROVE IT.

Underneath that:

NO.

Underneath that:

COWARD.

The Acoustics Engineer approaches with a screwdriver.

ACOUSTICS ENGINEER:

Sight maintains distance. Sound enters the body. Vibrates the

tympanic membrane, bone,
cavities—

AXEL:

So does a knife.

ACOUSTICS ENGINEER:

That is not germane.

AXEL:

Neither is engraving metaphysics
on brass.

Clara blinks.

The room freezes.

STANDARDS:

Impossible.

Clara blinks again.

STANDARDS:

Stop doing that.

CUT 01 AGAIN, BUT WRONG

A cash register opens.

One dollar.

Twenty-five cents.

A little girl's hand reaches toward Clara.

CUT BEFORE CONTACT.

CUT 26 — CONFESSION

The chronicler is now knee-deep in the lake/laboratory.

CHRONICLER:

I confess I climbed the white hill.

CUT:

His shoe.

Inside it: a hill.

CHRONICLER:

I confess the hill entered my shoe.

CUT:

Axel smoking a cigarette she cannot physically smoke.

AXEL:

A puppet is the perfect portrait of sovereignty.

CHRONICLER:

Because both require strings?

AXEL:

No.

CHRONICLER:

Because both deny the hand controlling—

AXEL:

No.

CHRONICLER:

Because—

AXEL:

Because people keep explaining them.

She flicks the cigarette.

It lands in the lake.

The lake catches fire.

CUT 06 — EIGHT-PART RECONCILIATION

Inventory:

Four stitches.

Two gloves.

Two graphite pencils.

Nothing remains.

OFFSCREEN VOICE:

Nothing remains of what?

OTHER OFFSCREEN VOICE:

Precisely.

FIRST VOICE:

Stop saying precisely when you don't know the answer.

SECOND VOICE:

Precisely.

CUT 21 — THE REVOLUTION OF THE MEASURING SPOON

We measure Clara.

We measure Axel.

We measure the Gate.

We measure Clara's gaze.

We measure the distance between Axel and the concept of Axel.

We measure one delay:

0.8 seconds.

We measure the apparatus measuring the delay.

We measure the anxiety introduced by measuring the apparatus measuring the delay.

We measure the spoon.

The spoon is 14.2 centimeters long.

The spoon requests legal representation.

The Department refuses.

The spoon disappears underground.

By morning there are spoon pamphlets everywhere.

THE UTENSILS HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT THEIR DRAWERS.

CUT 11 — PRAGUE, BUT NOT PRAGUE

Rain.

Cobblestones.

A tram passes through an intersection that exists nowhere on any map.

Inside sits the old woman from Axel's hair.

Outside stands the seamstress from the hinge.

They recognize one another.

Neither waves.

A bell rings.

Time suffers a minor clerical accident.

1938 becomes 1968 becomes 1989 becomes Thursday becomes May becomes 14:03.

ERR_TEMPORAL_EQUALITY:

WHY SHOULD CLARA BE FIRST?

The tram vanishes into a tunnel.

The tunnel passes through Axel's dress.

CUT 17 — THEORY GETS SHOT IN THE KNEE

CHRONICLER:

Clara is epoché.

CLARA:

No.

CHRONICLER:

Axel is différance.

AXEL:

No.

CHRONICLER:

The Gate is the rupture of representation by wounded materiality—

GATE:

No.

CHRONICLER:

Then what are you?

Long silence.

GATE:

Gate.

CHRONICLER:

But symbolically—

GATE:

Don't make me come over there.

The chronicler looks at camera.

CHRONICLER:

This is becoming hostile to criticism.

GATE:

Correct.

CUT 05 — THE CHEAPNESS OF GOD

A museum curator holds Clara delicately in white gloves.

CURATOR:

Damage has produced singularity.

CLARA:

Twenty-five cents of that sentence was mine.

CURATOR:

The object transcends mass production—

CLARA:

Dollar.

CURATOR:

—through the accidental inscription—

CLARA:

Dollar ten.

CURATOR:

—of history upon its surface.

CLARA:

Dollar twenty-five. Sold.

The curator vanishes.

The gloves remain.

They begin applauding.

CUT 23 — EXECUTION WITHOUT EXECUTIONER

The moon is guilty of excessive literature.

The hill stands beside the lake.

Axel stands on the hill.

Clara stands inside Axel's shadow.

This is geometrically impossible but Geometry has been detained for questioning.

A gallows appears at the horizon.

Nobody hangs from it.

This emptiness proves more disturbing than a body.

The bell counts a time no watch admits.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four—

AXEL:

What happens when it reaches twelve?

CLARA:

It starts counting someone else.

CUT 08 — SAMPLE

ERR_SAMPLE_LAUNDERED:

THEIR VOICE HAS RETURNED.

JUST LIKE THE LEFT SIDE OF THE STAGE.

A voice speaks.

VOICE:

I was never yours.

CLARA:

Mine?

VOICE:

No.

AXEL:

Mine?

VOICE:

No.

CHRONICLER:

History's?

VOICE:

Don't flatter History.

SEAMSTRESS:

Then who spoke?

VOICE:

You still think a voice needs an owner.

Static.

Then laughter.

Or rail friction.

Or rain.

CUT 14 — DINNER

Clara and Axel sit opposite each other at a tiny plastic table.

Between them: soup.

AXEL:

Do dolls eat?

CLARA:

Not unless someone needs a metaphor.

They stare at the soup.

Neither touches it.

AXEL:

What's reconciliation?

CLARA:

A word committees use when contradictions survive lunch.

AXEL:

And judgment?

CLARA:

Reconciliation with a winner.

AXEL:

And neutrality?

Clara considers this.

CLARA:

Judgment with good lighting.

The streetlamp outside immediately explodes.

CUT 25 — THE GATE OPENS

No image.

Only sound.

First, an iron hospital dreaming of forests.

Then tram wheels.

Then scissors.

Then May rain.

Then asphalt being dragged
across canvas.

Then the infinitesimal CLICK of
Clara's plastic eyelid.

Then a human breath.

Whose?

Wrong question.

The Gate opens acoustically.

Walls tremble.

Bone participates.

The audience becomes involuntary
architecture.

A graphite pencil rolls nine centimeters across the table.

Stops.

The government changes.

CUT 13 — AN ARGUMENT BETWEEN LEFT AND RIGHT

LEFT GLOVE:

She's ours.

RIGHT GLOVE:

Which one?

LEFT:

Clara.

RIGHT:

Why?

LEFT:

Fixed seat. Administrative hierarchy. White field.

RIGHT:

Then Axel's ours.

LEFT:

Right-tier enterprise. Variable. Black field.

RIGHT:

Good.

They shake hands.

Immediately Clara's shadow falls right.

Axel's frequency returns left.

Both gloves stare.

LEFT:

Do that again.

The dolls do nothing.

RIGHT:

They did that deliberately.

LEFT:

Can plastic be insolent?

CLARA:

Apparently.

CUT 24 — THE TWIN FIELDS

One pale.

One dark.

Wind crosses both.

At first the boundary is obvious.

Then wheat bends.

Shadow enters wheat.

Wheat enters shadow.

The distinction survives conceptually approximately six seconds longer than it survives visually.

A committee rushes forward with stakes and measuring tape.

The wind steals the tape.

The fields hold an election.

No ballots exist.

No electorate has been defined.

The result is unanimous and never disclosed.

ERR_TWIN_FIELDS_DECIDE.

“What did they decide?”

Precisely—

“No. Don't you fucking dare.”

CUT 16 – GRACE

Kleist arrives extremely late.

He looks at the dolls.

They look at him.

KLEIST:

A marionette has grace because it lacks self-consciousness.

AXEL:

We've heard.

KLEIST:

Then you understand—

CLARA:

We developed self-consciousness while waiting for you.

Kleist removes his hat.

There is another, smaller Kleist underneath.

Nobody comments.

This is the first act of genuine kindness in the film.

CUT 20 – THE PAINTING IS NO LONGER A PUPPET

The puppets remain inside the painting.

But the painting–

No.

Start again.

The painting remains inside the puppets.

But the puppets–

No.

Again.

Paint.

Plastic.

Graphite.

Wire.

Sand.

Skin tone.

Saturation.

Cheap vinyl.

Human fingerprints.

A scratch.

A stitch.

A field.

The categories have entered the corridor and exchanged clothes.

Black produces glare.

White accumulates fingerprints.

The left hand wakes inside the right glove.

The Fixed Seat migrates.

The Variable becomes law.

Matter refuses metaphor's attempt to smuggle it out of the room.

CUT 27 — METADATA

Dawn.

Technicians gather around the Gate.

It has recorded everything.

Every shoe scrape.

Every cough.

Every vibration.

Every withheld objection.

Every tram bell.

Every absurd philosophical proposition.

Every silence.

Every voice.

TECHNICIAN:

There's a problem.

DIRECTOR:

What?

TECHNICIAN:

Sequence data is corrupted.

DIRECTOR:

Meaning?

TECHNICIAN:

We can't determine who spoke first.

DIRECTOR:

Clara or Axel?

TECHNICIAN:

Anyone.

The seamstress looks up from her hinge.

SEAMSTRESS:

Good.

TECHNICIAN:

It's catastrophic.

SEAMSTRESS:

Same thing, sometimes.

FALSE ENDING ONE

Sunrise.

The Gate becomes a constellation through its scratches and holes.

The first tram crosses the invisible bridge.

Underneath: reeds, discarded gloves, graphite, the black water of May.

Clara and Axel have vanished.

The camera finds the $1.25 price tag stuck to a stone.

Music rises.

FADE—

CLARA:

No.

Hard cut.

FALSE ENDING TWO

Clara and Axel walk together into the pale field.

Sentimental strings.

The twin fields reconcile.

The hill descends.

The clock begins again.

Every symbol finds its corresponding meaning.

The audience experiences the narcotic pleasure of completion.

Then Axel turns around.

AXEL:

Absolutely not.

She walks backward through the scene.

The strings reverse.

The clock regurgitates its seconds.

The hill rises back into position.

The fields tear their reconciliation agreement in half.

ERR_POEM_ATTEMPTS_RECONCILIATION.

Much better.

CUT 00 — AFTER THE END, BEFORE THE BEGINNING

The screen is black.

We hear two voices.

CLARA:

Did you speak first?

AXEL:

I don't remember.

CLARA:

Neither does the Gate.

AXEL:

Then maybe there wasn't a first.

CLARA:

There is always a first.

AXEL:

That's what people who arrive second say.

Silence.

A tram bell.

CLARA:

Axel?

AXEL:

What?

CLARA:

Are we dolls?

Axel laughs.

Her laughter arrives 0.8 seconds late.

THE LAST CUT — THE ONE THE EDITOR WAS ORDERED TO REMOVE

Morning enters through every abrasion in the Gate.

No transcendence.

No reconciliation.

No grand revolutionary synthesis.

Just light behaving materially among damaged things.

Clara is plastic.

Axel is plastic.

The hill is a hill except when it isn't.

The gate is a gate except when saying so becomes another little tyranny.

The old woman finally gets off the tram.

Nobody notices.

She walks across the twin fields carrying a paper bag of groceries. At the exact place where pale becomes dark—or dark becomes pale, depending on which bureaucracy issued your map—she stops.

She hears something.

Not God.

Not History.

Not Clara.

Not Axel.

Not the Author.

Something smaller.

Cheaper.

A remaining frequency.

The nearly inaudible vibration produced when two pieces of plastic touch.

TOK.

She waits.

TOK.

The hill answers.

Far away, inside a curl of Axel's hair, the first tram of morning crosses an invisible bridge.

The Gate records it.

The Gate records everything.

But when the archivists arrive with their labels, timestamps, theories, ideologies, rulers, gloves, genealogies, phenomenologies, reconciliations, lefts, rights, heights, depths, wounds, metaphors and magnificent explanatory suitcases—

the Gate has developed teeth.

It bites.

CUT TO WHITE.

ERR_READER_AWAITS_RESOLUTION.

CUT TO BLACK.

ERR_RESOLUTION_NOT_FOUND.

A pause.

Then, from somewhere behind the screen:

DING.

The tram doors open.

No one gets on.

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THE PANOPTICON INSTITUTE OF RECURSIVE INQUIRY

A Manifesto, and the Only Diploma You Will Ever Need

I. FOUNDING PRINCIPLE

The Panopticon Institute of Recursive Inquiry was not founded. It was noticed.

It was noticed, as it happens, somewhere between mile markers — on which highway remains disputed, the map in question being of Guam.

It has been operating, uncredentialed and unzoned, for as long as there have been people awake at 2 a.m. with a phone in one hand and a question they refused to let go of.

The Institute has no campus, because the campus was never the point. The campus was the collateral — the thing you mortgaged your twenties to in exchange for a library card and a building with your professor's

office in it. The Institute has dispensed with the collateral. It has kept the library.

The Institute's central claim, filed here as founding doctrine, is this: Anyone holding a thirty-dollar phone and a will to keep asking the next question already has provisional access to more primary sources, more recorded lectures, and more digitized special collections than any single physical university could have offered a hundred years of tuition-paying students.

The bottleneck was never access.

It was believing you needed permission.

The Institute grants no permission. It only grants the diploma.

II. WHAT THE INSTITUTE IS NOT

The Institute is not opposed to universities, professors,

libraries, or brick and mortar. Many of the free materials referenced below exist because real universities — MIT, Yale, Stanford, and the great public libraries whose collections feed the Internet Archive's lending shelves — decided to open their doors on their own initiative.

The Institute is opposed to stagnation dressed as prestige. To the notion that knowledge becomes real only after someone in an office signs for it.

To waiting.

III. THE DIPLOMA

Detach along the perforation. Frame it, tape it above your desk, fold it into your wallet. It requires no notarization and answers to no registrar.

THE PANOPTICON INSTITUTE OF RECURSIVE INQUIRY

est. whenever you started looking things up out of real hunger and not because it was assigned

Let it be known that

(name, or the name you go by, or no name at all)

is hereby recognized as a

DOCTOR OF RECURSIVE INQUIRY

having satisfied the Institute's sole requirement: the refusal to stop asking the next question once the first one had been answered.

This diploma carries no accreditation, because accreditation was always a claim made by an institution about itself, and this Institute has nothing to protect.

This diploma expires never, and is revoked only by the graduate's own decision to stop looking things up.

Countersigned by no one. Filed nowhere. Valid everywhere a phone gets signal.

IV. THE LIBRARY

Reading list. Not a curriculum. There is no curriculum.

Full Texts

- Internet Archive — millions of digitized books, a lending library built from public and university collections, plus Internet Archive Scholar.
- Project Gutenberg — tens of thousands of public-domain books in multiple formats.
- HathiTrust Digital Library — a shared digital library built by research universities.
- Wikisource and Wikibooks — primary texts and open textbooks.

- Perseus Digital Library – Greek and Latin texts with integrated dictionaries.
- Standard Ebooks – beautifully typeset editions of public-domain works.

Recorded Lectures

- MIT OpenCourseWare – complete course materials from MIT.
- Open Yale Courses – full recorded semester-length courses.
- Khan Academy – structured instruction from arithmetic through college-level mathematics and science.
- University lecture channels on YouTube – uneven, but often excellent.

Papers and Journals

- arXiv — preprints in mathematics, physics, computer science, and related fields.
- DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals) — peer-reviewed journals that are free by design.

- Google Scholar — a search layer connecting much of the scholarly literature.

Reference

- Wikipedia — not the destination; the doorway.

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy — peer-reviewed and continuously updated.

- Smithsonian Open Access — millions of openly licensed images and collection records.

Audio

- LibriVox — volunteer-read public-domain audiobooks.
- Libby / OverDrive — digital borrowing through participating public libraries.

V. CLOSING PRINCIPLE

The Institute does not ask you to trust it. It asks only that, before tonight's impulse passes, you open one of the libraries above and begin.

Keep the diploma somewhere you'll actually see it — not as proof that you finished anything, but as a standing permission slip you wrote for yourself. For a school that was never going to check attendance.

—Filed for the back pages of WANDERAKTE (formerly Fowl Feathered Review), aboard Larry, care of The Spring-Wound Mammoth Pancake Coalition.

PUBLICATION LINEAGE & EARLIER PUBLICATIONS

WANDERAKTE traces its lineage to a **Honeywell/WEIN computer system** in tandem with a rented Xerox machine, circa 1979.

The Almanac was succeeded by Fowl Feathered Review, published under the Fowlpox Press imprint. The first 34 issues of Fowl Feathered Review, along with the poetry collections and chapbooks listed below, remain archived at https://fowlpoxpress.yolasite.com/. Hundreds of further issues followed under the same title.

Fowlpox Press has since been succeeded in all operational, financial, and vehicular respects by The Spring-Wound Mammoth Pancake Coalition — not to be confused with the Spring-Wound Mammoth Waffle Coalition, its now-defunct sister company — under whose stewardship the magazine now publishes as WANDERAKTE.

Chapbooks and collections published under the Fowlpox Press / Fowl Feathered Review era:

1. [Theoretical] Chaos by A.J. Huffman
2. A Mermaid Crashing into Dawn by Linda M. Crate
3. A Rag-Torn World by Dawnell Harrison
4. A Sleep/less Night: A-Z Poems by Kristopher D. Taylor
5. Aging Within These Syllables by Felino A. Soriano
6. All Right Already by Bruce McRae
7. Between These Rhythms: Bone & Ash by Felino A. Soriano
8. Burning Los Angeles by Robin Wyatt Dunn

9. Bye, Donna Summer! – haiku by Ali Znaidi

10. Candid by Gregory Liffick

11. Chalk Lines by Brian Michael Barbeito

12. Chemotherapy for the Soul by Leilanie Stewart

13. Clockwise Cats by Alison Ross

14. Conversations with the Muse by Neil Ellman

15. Dancing with Hedgehogs by K.J. Hannah Greenberg

16. Desecrations by Howie Good

17. Double-Takes by Neil Ellman

18. Eco Echoes, First Selection by Duane Locke

19. Electronic Loss and Other Poems by Gary Beck

20. Espials by Felino A. Soriano

21. Experimental Ruminations by Ali Znaidi

22. Family Matters by Steve DeFrance

23. Fishing in the Knife Drawer by Mark J. Mitchell

24. Fluid & Crystallized by KJ Hannah Greenberg

25. Forms, Migrating by Felino A. Soriano

26. Grimaldi by Christopher Mulrooney

27. Harbor of Grace by Jnana Hodson

28. How Much of by Heller Levinson

29. In the Parallel of Pursued Occurrences by Felino A. Soriano

30. Internet Yearnings and Other Poems by Gary Beck

31. Mindscaping by Changming Yuan

32. Miró's Poesie: Ekphrastic Poems by Alison Ross

33. Nation of Nate: A Dongpo Pork Mixtape of Melancholy & Madness – Nathaniel S. Rounds, ed. Alison Ross

34. Nature Poems by Danny P. Barbare

35. Of Isolated Limning by Felino A. Soriano

36. Of Thunder, Pearls and Birdsong by Steve Denehan

37. Ostrakon Epistles: Selected Works of Nathaniel S. Rounds (ed. Ilan Blaine)

38. Pathos | Particular Invocation by Felino A. Soriano
39. Poetry: No Poetic License Needed! by Haniyeh Yaseri

40. rhythm:s by Felino A. Soriano

41. Somehow Poems by Gregory Liffick

42. Tale of Twin Cities by Michael K. Gause and Alex Stolis

43. Terrestrial Illuminations by Duane Locke

44. The Barber's Boy by Phil Boiarski

45. The Daisy Roots Under My Pillow by Holly Day

46. The Foreigner of Two Fabrics by Stanford Cheung

47. The Heart Broken Open by Ronald Pies

48. The Ignited Soul by Dawnell Harrison
49. The Love Death and Other Poems by Dawnell Harrison

50. The Maiden Sky: New and Selected Poems by Dawnell Harrison

51. The Moon and Her Ocean by Austin Davis

52. The Red Forest by Dmitry Blizniuk

53. Vocal Apparitions: New & Selected Poems 2012–2016 by Felino A. Soriano

54. Waving at Strangers by Ken W. Simpson

55. When the Moon Is New by Joan McNerney

56. whoosh by Heller Levinson

57. Word Mosaics by Karen Robiscoe

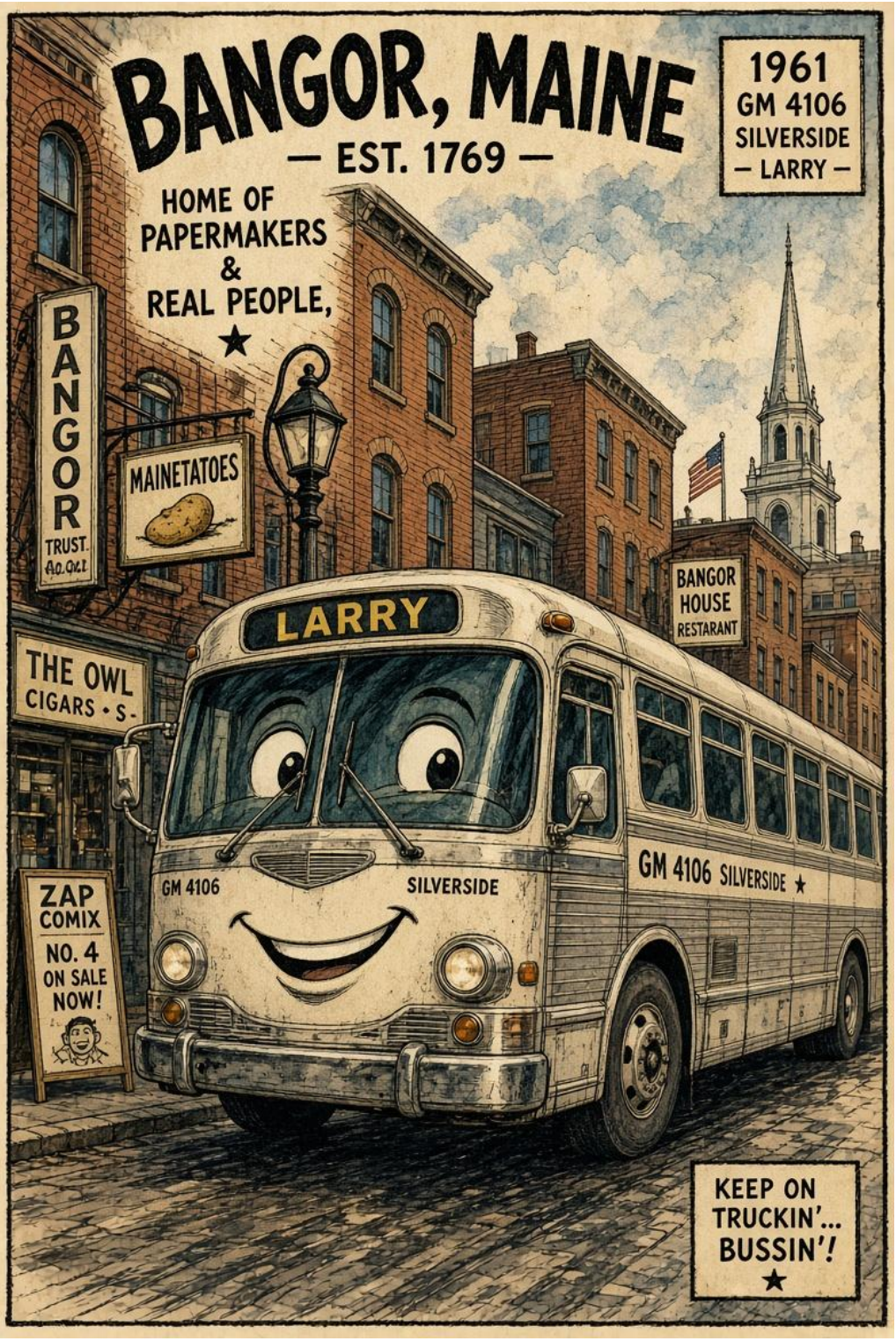
58. Wordscaping by Changming Yuan

More recent issues of WANDERAKTE are available FREE by email subscription, or in POD, eBook, or archived format, care of The Spring-Wound Mammoth Pancake Coalition. Contact [new Coalition contact address – placeholder, swap for the real one] for details.

There are no copies extent or otherwise of Doctor Zhai's remaining. If you find a copy, drop us a line.

Circa 1979, there was a Xeroxed collection of images and visual forays into data, made alongside experimentation with a **Honeywell/WEIN computer system**. This project was called **VERSUCHSANORDNUNG I**. The computer work and the Xerox work were not directly connected: the photocopies were not printouts from the computer, nor was the Xerox machine functioning as an output device for the Honeywell system.

Do not contact the Waffle Coalition. They will not answer, and if they do, it isn't them.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